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SCIENCE FICTION YEARBOOK

The Fear Neutralizer,
by EDMOND HAMILTON

The Dark Angel,
by HENRY KUTTNER

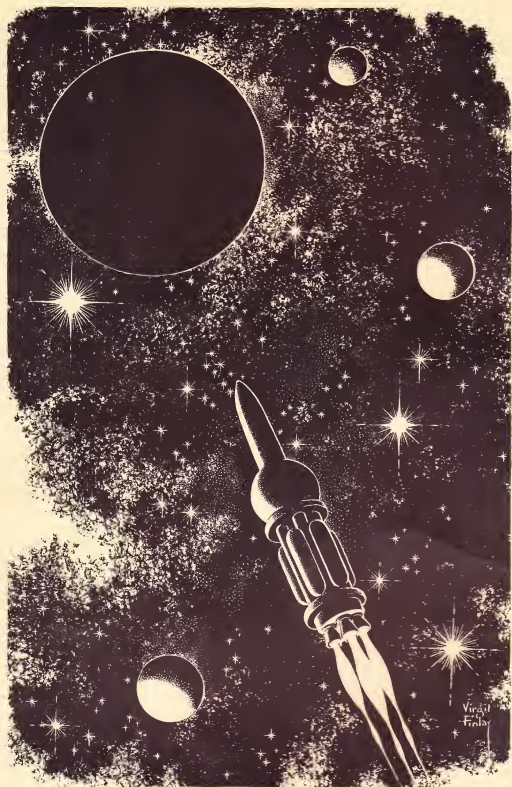
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by MIRIAM ALLEN DE FORD

**All the Time
in the World,**
by ARTHUR C. CLARKE

The Mad Domneys,
by VERNE CHUTE

The Invaders,
by GORDON R. DICKSON





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Finlay

SCIENCE FICTION YEARBOOK

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"Who's afraid of the big bad wolf?" "Not I," said John Stuart, as he started to paint the town red!



the FEAR NEUTRALIZER

By EDMOND HAMILTON

"**F**EAR," said Dr. Bascom impressively, "is the curse of the world."

He held up his lean finger in pedagogic fashion to emphasize his point, his small figure rigidly drawn up and his eyes behind glittering glasses austere focused upon my face.

I hastened to utter an obsequious, "Yes, sir," and tried to look as attentive and respectful as I could. Inwardly I was wishing I could get away from the old bore and hunt up Helen, his daughter, but I was too afraid of the irascible little scientist to say so.

"Just look at this fear-ridden human race of ours!" exclaimed Dr. Bascom. "All its happiness is thwarted and poisoned by fear—fear of what other people may think, fear of the future, fear of the consequences of every act."

"Think how happy everyone would be if they did not have dread of some kind in their minds all the time. I tell you, the human race will never attain any real progress or happiness, John, until it has banished fear utterly from its make-up!"

"That's right, sir!" I hastily responded as he again paused rhetorically. I

felt by then that I had overworked "Yes, sir" latcly.

Dr. Bascom's voice lowered.

"John, I shall be the man who releases the human race from the thrall of fear!"

"You, sir?" I repeated stupidly. My mind was really wondering anxiously whether Helen had not gone out while I was caged here.

"Yes, I!" Dr. Bascom said proudly. "Come here, John, and I'll show you what I have done."

He led me over to a table in the corner of the laboratory. There was a big cylindrical thing looming up beside the table, shrouded in a canvas cover, but what caught my attention was the mechanism on the table to which the scientist was pointing. Being an insurance agent myself, I didn't make any sense out of the thing. It looked like a complicated electrical apparatus, shielded by a nickel cover, and with a copper helix spiral around the outside of the cylindrical cover.

"Now watch this," said Dr. Bascom importantly, taking two wire cages from underneath the table.

In one was an ordinary mouse. In the other was a fluffy, smoke-colored cat that I recognized as Helen's pet Persian. I wondered if she knew he father was experimenting with it.

Dr. Bascom put the mouse into the same cage as the cat. The tiny rodent shrank into a corner, paralyzed with dread. The cat eyed it, then flattened down, its tail beginning to switch.

"You see," said the little scientist earnestly, "the mouse is in deadly fear of the cat."

"A remarkable experiment, Doctor." I congratulated him readily.

"You blockhead! *That* is not the experiment," he snapped. "Everyone knows that a mouse is afraid of a cat. But watch now!"

He put the little cylindrical mechanism on top of the cage containing the two animals. He touched a switch and

the tiny mechanism gave off a faint hum.

I watched. Then I was amazed to see the mouse come out of the corner into which dread had frozen it. The little rodent unconcernedly began to wash itself with its paws.

Then, sniffing the floor of the cage, it walked across to the cat. It sniffed curiously at the Persian's paws, and around its flattened head. The cat seemed too petrified by sheer surprise to make a pounce on the mouse for the moment.

Dr. Bascom reached in for the rodent and put it back into its own cage. Then he turned triumphantly to me.

"You saw what happened?"

"That mouse must have been drunk or something," I said. "I remember reading a story once—"

"No, no!" the little scientist stormed. "Can't you see that it was this apparatus of mine atop the cage which neutralized the normal fears of the mouse and made it utterly fearless of the cat? It neutralized the cat's fears, too, but of course we didn't notice any change because a cat isn't afraid of a mouse, anyway."

I stared at the little mechanism. "You say that thing did it? How could it?"

Dr. Bascom smiled masterfully. "That is my secret, John. But I don't mind telling you the basic principle of the thing. Fear, John, is an emotion. But what largely controls our emotions? The answer is—the ductless glands. Physiologists have learned during the last few decades that such glands as the thyroid, the pituitary and others largely determine the mental and emotional make-up of an animal by the amount of their secretions.

"I have been studying the ductless glands for years. I discovered recently that one of them is definitely responsible through its secretions for the emotion of fear. In some people that gland secretes freely, and such people are consequently always fearful, even cowardly. In other people, the fear gland

does not secrete so much, and people like that are unusually courageous.

"I told myself, 'Bascom, you are the greatest scientist of the age for making this discovery. But you will be even greater, you will be the supreme benefactor of the race, if you can find a way to stop the secretion of the fear gland altogether!'" He was getting excited by his own words now.

"And I found that way, John! I learned that a certain type of electrical radiation has a completely inhibiting effect upon that particular gland. That mechanism emits such radiation. Any subject that I put under the influence of the mechanism will have its fear-secretions inhibited, will immediately lose all its fear."

"Remarkable!" I told him. "But how is it going to benefit the race much to make mice brave with that thing?"

"John, you are a complete fool," the little scientist informed me angrily. "This little apparatus is only a model which I built to test the principle. But if I use a projector many times larger, capable of broadcasting the fear-neutralizing radiation over a great area, capable of affecting all the people in that area, it will—"

He stopped suddenly, irritated by my uncomprehending stare.

"I might as well be explaining to a wooden post as to an idiot like you," he snapped. "Get out of here, before I lose my temper!"

"Yes, sir!" I said, more joyfully than I had all the last half hour, and hastened out of the laboratory before Dr. Bascom had time to change his mind.

I HASTILY searched through the big country house for Helen, but couldn't find her. Then I went outside and saw her practicing her serve on the sunlit tennis court.

She saw me and came up to the veranda, swinging her racket and giving me a mocking smile.

"I thought you came out this afternoon to see me," she said.

"I did," I told her hastily, "but I

got to talking with your father and couldn't get away."

"Poor John," she mocked as she sat down by me. "Why didn't you summon up what spunk you have and tell him you just weren't interested?"

I looked at Helen Bascom with hungry, hopeless admiration. I'd been in love with her for more than a year but had never got up enough nerve to tell her so. There was something so proud about her dark beauty, something faintly scornful in her cool eyes that had always awed me when I felt like pouring out my admiration. It awed me now, so I sat making inane remarks about tennis and the weather.

Then suddenly it happened! And it surprised me, I swear, as much as it could have surprised anybody else. I could feel my ears burning, and there was a deep, strong hum going through my head, but I suddenly put my arm around Helen and said calmly:

"Come on, babe, slip us a kiss."

She was so utterly astounded that for the moment she couldn't resist. Before she knew it, she was on my lap and I kissed her—and what I mean, I *kissed* her!

I tell you, she wasn't any more astonished than I was. Yet for all my astonishment, I still wasn't the least bit afraid of her any more. I kissed her again, and made it even better.

Then Helen's amazement passed, and to my increased surprise she nestled closer in my arms, her eyes not faintly scornful now but soft and melting.

"Oh, John," she cooed. "I'm so glad I was wrong about you."

"Huh?" I said. "What do you mean, wrong about me?"

She explained tenderly. "I always was in love with you but I wouldn't even admit it to myself. I so hated the thought of marrying a spineless rabbit of a man such as you appeared to be. But I see now that was all pretense—that you're really, beneath it, the kind of masterful man I want."

I laughed heartily at the thought of me being a spineless rabbit. Why, I wasn't afraid of anything on earth!

I pulled her to her feet and started toward my roadster.

"Come on, kid, we're going to drive in to town and get married right now."

"Don't you think we ought to tell Father first?" Helen asked. "He'll be pretty angry if we don't."

"He'll get over it," I told her nonchalantly, and she laughed carefree assent as she got into the car with me.

I was feeling great, and I made that roadster roar going into town. We hit seventy-five and eighty on the stretches, and went around the curves on two wheels.

Helen's eyes sparkled with excitement.

"Is this the fastest you can do?" she asked over the roar of the wind.

"Not by a long shot," I called back, jamming the accelerator to the floorboard. "Hold tight, gal!"

WE zoomed down that concrete road like a comet. I almost turned us over jerking the car around a haywagon, and both Helen and I shouted with laughter at our narrow escape.

To tell the truth, at the back of my mind I was surprised and puzzled by my own recklessness, for I had always been one of the most careful of drivers. But now I got a big kick seeing how nearly I could make the old crate imitate an airplane.

Every other driver on the road was zipping along at the same suicidal speed. Cars were racing each other, cutting crazily around each other, and taking the wildest chances. We saw a half dozen bad wrecks before we got to town, but they didn't bother us—we were getting a thrill.

I drove into the city, still making sixty. Traffic was wild there, cars ignoring stop lights and signs, and colliding with each other at every corner. I headed toward the courthouse to get our marriage license.

I had to jam on the brakes when I came to a wreck that obstructed the street. A traffic cop who looked pretty wild-eyed ran up to us and stuck his head into my car.

"You came down that street a mile a minute!" he snarled. "Have you drivers all lost what little brains you had?"

"Who do you think you're talking to, Ignatz?" I snapped.

And then I did something I'd often secretly wanted to do. I reached out and gave that traffic cop my right fist square in the jaw. He toppled wildly back.

Helen giggled. I thought nothing more of it, and calmly turned the car and detoured around the wreck.

We parked a block from the courthouse, and the first thing I saw was the bulky figure of Mr. Wilson, my boss, coming along the street toward us.

He had seen me, and he was frowning as black as thunder when he came up to us.

"What are you doing running around town with a girl, John Stuart?" he demanded. "I thought I sent you out to look up that Bedford prospect?"

"That prospect can wait until I get good and ready to see him," I told my boss coolly. "I've got important business on hand."

"Important business?" he howled. "You young fool, your business is selling insurance, and if you don't attend to it, I'll fire you!"

"You can't fire me. I quit!" I snapped, and then ignored him. "Come on, Helen."

Wilson stared after me with mouth gaping as we moved away.

"That was a good job you just quit, wasn't it?" Helen asked unconcernedly.

"Sure, but I'll get another—if I want one," I told her carelessly. "The morrow will take care of itself."

Inside the courthouse, the marriage license clerk was just closing his window. I pulled it open again.

"Come on, hand out a license," I directed. "You're not supposed to close for two hours yet."

"So what?" he sneered. "I feel like taking the afternoon off, and I'm going to do it."

"A license, shrimp, or I'll come in there and take your office and you apart." I told him ominously.

I didn't scare him a bit, I must admit. He was a withered, pint-sized little fellow with whom I could have wiped up the floor, but he just yawned boredly at me as though he were annoyed by something trifling, and flipped out a blank to me.

"Fill that in," he told me, scowling. "And don't start getting tough, or I'm liable to hang a mouse on your eye."

WHEN we got out of there with the license and started looking for a preacher, we found all kinds of craziness going on in the street.

I noticed a small boy stop in front of a candy store. He eyed the tempting confections inside the plate glass window, and then nonchalantly broke the window with his ball bat and helped himself.

A half dozen fist-fights were going on along the street. Then we heard a commotion from a bank a block away, and in a few moments we learned that two thugs had walked in there and had coolly tried to rob the bank with no weapons but their bare hands!

The police were dashing around wildly, and there were wrecks and traffic snarls everywhere, due to the crazy driving. And every time two cars collided, their drivers hopped out and proceeded to stage a fist-fight beside the wreck.

A hulking fellow stopped beside us and stared admiringly at Helen.

"You're some looker, kid!" he told her brazenly. "How about shaking that creampuff and coming along with me?"

"Creampuff, am I?" I snarled, and jumped at him. He was a foot taller

than I, but we were going at it hammer and tongs in a second.

A cop ran up and tried to separate us. I gave him a push in the chest and then socked my antagonist a beauty right on the chin, and he went down for the count.

The cop I'd pushed over scrambled up, and I asked him belligerently:

"Well, do you want to make something out of it?"

"Aw, everybody in town has gone nuts," he said disgustedly. "I quit this darned job." He tossed his badge coolly into the gutter and walked away.

I grabbed Helen's arm and we struggled through the confusion of the streets. We spotted a church, and in the parsonage behind it we found the scholarly, elderly clergyman busy writing at his desk.

"Can't be bothered marrying anyone now!" he told me. "I'm busy writing next week's sermon."

His ascetic face lit with unholy joy. "For twelve years I've wanted to tell my congregation just what I think of them, but I've not dared," he said. "Now, I've decided to do it. Next week's sermon will make their ears burn!"

I finally prevailed on him to leave the sermon long enough to marry Helen and me. Then, delirious with happiness, we went back out into the street and started to my parked car.

The city by now seemed to have gone completely mad. As Helen and I went on toward my car, things seemed getting wilder than ever. There were fights everywhere, and sounds of domestic dissension and battle came to our ears from almost every house we passed.

A newsboy was shouting his papers and I bought one. The editor had slapped in a last-minute editorial in big type on the front page.

"This city is full of crooks," he had written, "and the mayor is one of the biggest of them. As for the owner of this paper, here's how he hushes things

up—" And the editorial went on to expose scandals about some of the paper's biggest advertisers.

Helen clutched my arm and said, "Look, John, there's a riot going on down at the auto plant!"

SURE enough, down there at the end of the street we could see a mob of surging men fighting in front of the plant, breaking clubs over each others' heads in a mad mêlée.

"What's the riot about?" I asked a man coming from that direction.

"It seems the men are beating up some of their bosses," he told me. "There's a few of them who have always been disliked, but until now the men were too afraid of their jobs to do anything about it." He laughed. "I'll say there doesn't seem to be much fear on the part of anybody today! I'm going home now to tell my wife what I think of her."

He walked on, grinning. But I had stopped dead, a sudden idea coming to me from his comment about the general absence of fear.

I was suddenly remembering Dr. Bascom's experiment with the fear neutralizer on the mouse, and was remembering the little scientist's further words, which I had not heeded at the time:

"But if I use a projector many times larger, capable of broadcasting the fear-neutralizing radiation over a great area—"

That big, canvas-covered mechanism in the corner of Dr. Bascom's laboratory! That must be just such a larger projector, I saw now, and with it the doctor had banished all normal fear from an area that included this city.

I remembered now, too, the deep, strong hum I had heard when Helen and I were sitting on the veranda. That was when the little scientist must have turned on the projector.

And his fear neutralizer was wrecking the city. I saw at once that the process should be stopped, before this town went completely crazy.

Understand, I was not the least bit afraid of the consequences if it was not stopped. But my reason and my sense of duty told me that I ought to bring a halt to Dr. Bascom's experiment.

I told Helen, though, "I guess we'd better drive back out to your home now. We should tell your father about our marriage."

"All right, John," she said happily, and we got into the car.

It was dangerous business driving out of town—not that the danger worried us any! And once out on the open road, I let the car out again and we hummed homeward faster than we had come.

I left Helen in the living room and hastened back into her father's laboratory. It was just as I'd expected!

There in the corner stood a huge cylindrical mechanism with a spiral helix around it, uncovered now, humming away like the devil and destroying all fear for miles around.

Dr. Bascom turned toward me. He had been mixing some chemicals together at a table.

"Hello, John," he said brightly. "I've been enjoying myself—performing some risky experiments which I was always afraid to try before."

"You're an old fool!" I told him brutally. "Where's the switch of this fear neutralizer?"

Then I found the switch myself and turned the thing off. For good measure. I smashed up the apparatus with blows from a piece of pipe. Helen came running in and stood there looking aghast. I motioned her out of the room imperiously, and she meekly obeyed. The door closed behind her.

"What in the devil do you mean by this?" the doctor demanded, turning to me furiously.

"That thing has nearly wrecked the city already!" I told him. "It banished all fear, there, just as you intended, but instead of making people happy, it made them so reckless and foolhardy

that they would soon have destroyed themselves!"

AND as I said that, for the first time, the terror of what had happened and what might have happened came home to me and made me tremble.

"Good Lord!" I said huskily, shaking with fear. "It's a good thing I thought to come back here."

The little doctor drew himself up to blast me with words, but I added quickly:

"You'd better never make another of these things, and had better keep mighty quiet about this one! If it ever gets out that you caused all that madness in the city today, you'll have a thousand damage suits filed against you."

"Hmm!" said Dr. Bascom, frowning thoughtfully at that.

"Perhaps you are right, John," he said after a moment. "It may be, after all, that fear, while it sometimes makes us miserable, is really the mainspring of the human race. Fear of the law, fear of the disapproval of others when we commit mean actions, fear of the consequences of improvidence—"

That reminded me of something and I exclaimed in dismay:

"Good Lord, my job! I forgot that I quit it!"

I grabbed the telephone and called my boss. Mr. Wilson's voice became an angry roar as soon as he learned who it was.

"You, Stuart?" he shouted. "What do you want, you impudent young whippersnapper?"

"I want to apologize for my insolence this afternoon," I said rapidly. "I was a little out of my head, I guess. And I'd like to have my job back if I can."

He growled, but said finally, "All right, you can have the job back. I wouldn't let you have it, mind you, if

I wasn't afraid that I couldn't find as good a man as you to take over your place."

"I'm mighty glad you're afraid of that, then," I said, and when I hung up, I muttered to myself, "Thank God for fear!"

Dr. Bascom told me frowningly, "John, on the whole I think you *are* right, and that it will save me much trouble if we say nothing to anyone at all about my experiment."

"As your son-in-law, Doctor, you can rely on me to preserve silence," I said quickly.

He turned a glittering, angry eye on me, and I quailed inwardly, for I was now in as much awe of the irascible little scientist as ever.

"Son-in-law? Hmph!" he said. "Well, if you and Helen are married, it can't be mended, I suppose. But get out of this laboratory now—I have to take this projector apart."

"Yes, sir!" I exclaimed eagerly, and respectfully backed out of the laboratory.

Helen was in the living room, and she was alarmed and worried as she ran toward me.

"John, I've just realized what dreadful chances you took in driving so recklessly, and in starting fights with all those men!" she exclaimed. "And losing your temper that way with father—smashing his apparatus! I guess I was too excited to be afraid then, but I am now!"

She put her arms around my neck and said earnestly:

"John, I want you to control this reckless fearlessness of yours from now on, to keep it suppressed and hidden as you did formerly. Promise me that you'll do that for me."

Her eyes were pleading. I put on a rueful look and said reluctantly:

"It'll be hard for me to control it, darling. But I'm sure I'll be able to do it—for you."





Third Alternative

By SAM MERWIN, JR.

There are odd, fatal differences—even in parallel worlds

THE arrogant amiability of Gerald Wister was amputated as by a surgeon's knife when he saw the man who could not be Bradford Lanning round a corner of the Hotel Castleford Lobby and vanish. The easy walk, the set of his shoulders, that profile briefly glimpsed—all were Lanning's.

But Bradford Lanning had been dead for three years—and it was Gerald Wister who had arranged the

matter. His stomach curled like an oyster in alcohol.

Acting on reflexes Wister brought out cigarette-case and lighter, discovered his fingers were shaking. He squared his shoulders, inhaled deeply, lit his smoke. It was, of course, ridiculous. The man who had rounded the corner ahead of him merely *looked* like Brad, merely *walked* like Brad, merely...

Carefully he wrapped himself in a

simulation of his previous mood of wellbeing. Then he walked deliberately through the lobby to the cocktail lounge, where Corinne Weir awaited him at a table. But his eyes were questioning, wary, as he moved.

Clear-eyed Corinne looked up at him with obvious concern. "What's the matter, Gerry?" she asked softly. "Seen a ghost?"

Wister felt the allusion unfortunate. In a way, he supposed, he *had* seen a ghost, even though it had been a creation of his own deep-buried guilt. He laughed a trifle shakily, murmured something about having hurried too fast to reach the Castleford on time.

"Surely a novelty—but flattering," said Corinne, smiling.

"Oh come, I always *try* to be prompt," Wister told her, "especially with you." He wished, not for the first time, that Corinne were not so completely devoted to the memory of the fiancé whose death he had arranged.

"But you're such a *busy* man of affairs," she said. Wister thought he detected mockery in her voice. He shrugged it off, ordered a double-Gibson, very dry. He needed one.

"You ought to take a rest, Gerry," said Regan Konetowsky, who occupied the third chair at the table. "No man can drive himself forever as you do." He spoke with a trace of foreign accent.

"It's no drive, Regan," replied Wister. "It's somewhere between a five-iron and a putt." He winced at his own corny gag.

"Missed putts have lost many championships," said Konetowsky owlishly. He was shading forty and to Wister it was incredible that he should have accomplished so much in so many fields of science. Already he was mentioned with—well, if not with Einstein, then with Fermi, Oppenheimer and the rest. There were whispers of a Nobel award, withheld only because of his youth.

"You should talk," growled Wister and the scientist laughed, absurdly young despite his pepper-and-salt hair. Wister glanced obliquely at Corinne, wondered whether the relationship between them still rested within the bounds of friendship and professional give-and-take.

HE HAD seen to it that Corinne need never work. This obligation he'd have undertaken even had he not been responsible for her fiancé's death. But Corinne had elected to immerse herself in science, had ultimately become Regan Konetowsky's assistant. She would, he thought, fulfill her purpose far better as a rich man's wife—say his own.

He downed his drink and said, "Incidentally, what's the occasion? You were mighty mysterious over the phone, Corinne."

"Oh—Regan's just finished his most important experiment," she replied, regarding Regan proudly. "We felt a celebration in order and decided to count you in."

"Indirectly you had much to do with our success," the scientist stated. Then, when Wister's eyebrows rose, "Corinne has been invaluable. If you hadn't managed her affairs so wisely she would not have been able to take the courses that enabled her to show me so many short cuts.

"Bushwah, Brain," said the girl, wrinkling her nose charmingly. "Why, if it hadn't been for..."

She talked on, but Wister heard nothing. His attention was caught by a wall mirror that offered a narrow view of the men's bar beyond a row of potted palms. In it he saw Bradford Lanning lift a glass to his lips. As he stared, incredulous, the man he had had slain three years before smiled, gestured a silent toast.

"Something wrong, Gerry?" Konetowsky's sharp question brought him back to immediate awareness. He looked down, saw his cocktail glass

lying on its side on the tablecloth in a widening stain.

"I guess I'm *not* quite up to par," he said. He rose, tried to smile. "Please excuse me—I'll run along home." He gripped his chairback tightly lest he sway in a faint.

He raced through the lobby, ignoring the stares of the curious, cut around to the men's bar, wormed his way rudely through the crowd of imbibers to the far end, where the ghost of Bradford Lanning—if it *had* been a ghost—stood and mocked him silently.

But no one was there—no one who looked even faintly like Lanning. The bartender could not help him—too many people, too many orders. Frustrated, Wister checked the mirror, saw Corinne and the scientist still at the table, heads close together. Slowly he turned away, walked out of the hotel.

The following day, while strolling back from his luncheon club to the offices on whose door his name stood alone, Wister saw Bradford Lanning again. This time the ghost was buying a paper from the newsdealer across the street. When Wister stopped, his former partner seemed to sense his presence. At any rate he turned, smiled, lifted his paper in cheery salute.

Wister fled back to his office, mopped icy sweat from his brow, ordered his receptionist to admit no one to see him. He passed the entire afternoon—between trips to his portable bar—staring out the big picture window at the shipping in the upper bay, taking stock of himself. He was far from satisfied with his findings.

It had not been an emotional murder. Any emotion involved had belonged to the corpse—if Lanning were still a corpse. They had been partners, the two of them, in an investment business largely financed by Lanning's fat inheritance from a rich uncle. Earlier they had been roommates in school and college.

During World War Two Lanning

had served with the Marines in the Pacific. Wister, thanks to a game leg acquired in a salad-day automobile crackup, had stayed home and minded the business, had quadrupled its capital, quintupled its markets and clients. Foreseeing V-J Day he had put it on a sound peacetime footing ahead of most of their competitors. Lanning should have been grateful.

But the Corps had invalidated Brad as a businessman. It had firmed his youthful idealism, deep-frozen his moral flexibility beyond reason. Certainly Wister had indulged in behind-the-scenes fixing when priorities made legitimate deals impossible. It had been a matter of do business or go under—and he had had not the slightest intention of going under.

He had been scrupulously honest in dividing the profits—but Brad had been utterly unreasonable on his return. He had dug out the grey-and-black-market deals, the specification shortcomings, the "gifts" to officials. When Wister had pointed out that exposure could mean prison for them both, Brad had insisted he preferred prison to profits piled up at the cost of blood shed by his Marine Corps comrades.

Reluctantly Wister had done what had to be done—he had even wept when the police asked him, along with Corinne, to visit the morgue and identify the remains. A shotgun, fired at close range, had destroyed most of the head—and when the killers, as ordered, set fire to car and corpse alike they had destroyed the fingerprints. But Brad's dentist had been able to make identification.

NOW Wister felt crowded with doubts. The dentist *could* have been wrong, honestly or otherwise. Unlikely, but all the same. . . And Wister could hardly check on the gunmen without risking all sorts of future shakedowns. No, he was going to have to go along on the assumption that the man he had had killed was his former partner.

Which left another alternative—that he was going mad. Wister, who prided himself on his ability to face reality, took this possibility in stride. He could hardly consult a psychiatrist—a psychiatrist was of small use to anyone who withheld facts and Wister was hardly in position to tell the truth. Furthermore a clever one might mine the truth through adroit questioning.

Perforce he had to let things ride. He went about his business as usual the next day and, when Lanning failed to reappear, regained a near-normal stride, even swung a highly profitable deal.

It was late in the third day, as he left the office en route to a discreetly orgiastic celebration of this success, that the phantom Lanning reentered his life. Wister was working his way through the rush-hour crowd toward the spot where his chauffeur waited.

"Nice going, Gerry." The voice, from behind him, was Lanning's—beyond all doubt. Lanning was back, he was here, he...

In the grip of panic Wister's resolution hardened. There was a third alternative open to him. He could pursue this phantom, if phantom it were, run it to earth, bury it—if need be see that it was laid to rest with a silver bullet in its heart.

This resolution must have been growing within him since his first encounter with the spectre in the hotel lobby—for he acted swiftly, without fear. He did wonder how the phantom had known of his successful deal—from that, "Nice going, Gerry," it must have. But Wister, pushed to the wall, was striking back. He had no time for such speculation.

He pivoted in time to see his former partner—a faint well-remembered smile on his lips—melt into the crowd. Lanning wore the uniform of the business district—chesterfield, grey homburg, pigskin gloves. But Wister knew his walk, the set of his shoulders. He

followed his victim unerringly, forgetting the lush and immoral young creature awaiting him uptown in a certain hotel suite.

Shadowing Lanning proved unexpectedly easy. He kept roughly a hundred feet behind his quarry, let the shoals of emerging office workers provide him with cover. So intent was he that he failed to note or reply to the greetings of men who knew him.

They left the financial district, moved east along shabbier, emptier streets. Where, a generation before, had been the mansions of the wealthy were now ragged tenements. Unemptied refuse cans lined the sidewalks, runny-nosed urchins played beneath rusty fire-escapes.

On the lip of a dust-mantled park the ghost turned south, headed into a warehouse area. It turned left around a corner and, when its pursuer followed, had vanished. But the door of a battered edifice swung gently in the rimy chill of the grey winter twilight.

Wister paused there, uneasily considered a trap. Why, he wondered, should ghost or man permit itself to be run to earth in such a place? But he did not hesitate long. The urgencies that had brought him thus far refused to be denied. Squaring heavy shoulders, he pushed on through into the building.

It was a dim cavernous place. His footsteps echoed emptily from the concrete. He paused again, heard unhurried steps ahead in the gloom, checked their direction, followed rapidly, as silently as he could.

Light flared suddenly before him, revealing the door to a room filled with thick smoke. Wister ran toward it as he saw the shadow of his quarry vanish into it. Recklessly he plunged after him, from deep twilight into what might have been sun-drenched fog.

HE STUMBLLED over a shallow step, found himself in a street behind the warehouse—in a very different part of town. For

a moment he stood blinking, wondering. He thought of the Williamsburg restoration. Here was the city as it must have looked half a century before his birth.

By the streetlights, which had come on while he was in the warehouse, it was neat, obviously a district of folk with means and taste. The sidewalks were evenly laid, the brick fronts of the old houses trim, their shutters neatly painted. At irregular intervals a polished brass door-knocker or doorplate or foot-scraper caught a highlight from the nearest streetlamp.

Wister, who had not heard of any such restoration project, wondered who had put up the money. Glancing backward, he found reassurance in the skyscrapers that raised twinkling tiers high in the darkening heavens. Then, returning to the matter at hand, he saw Lanning turn into a house in the next block. He gave chase, calling his expertner's name.

"Yes—you want me?" Lanning's voice was polite, surprised.

"Brad!" cried Wister, panting up to his quarry. By the light from the house he saw that it was indeed Lanning—if slightly older than his memory of the man. After all, it had been three years.

"I thought you were dead," he babbled. "What's the idea of ducking me?" He thought no more of ghosts—this was Brad in the flesh. The half-smile on his face was proof enough for Wister.

"Perhaps I preferred it that way," said the man officially dead. "But since you've finally found me, come on in, Gerry. You might as well see the rest of it."

Wister saw a fine old city mansion with fine white paneling and wainscoats, fine old furniture, prints and mirrors, fine old carpets underfoot. He thought of his own expensively "decorated" apartment uptown and envied Lanning his home.

"As I recall it you like bourbon

straight," said Lanning as he lifted a crystal decanter from a sideboard. Wister recognized as genuine Sheraton. "I think you'll like this, Gerry. Martha's great-grandfather had it laid down almost a century ago."

"Martha?" Wister blinked. Who, he wondered, was Martha? And what motives lay behind Lanning's withdrawal into his odd old-world corner in the downtown heart of the city?

He got his first answer quickly. A handsome woman, willowy and chic although she must have been in her late thirties, entered, gave Lanning a fond buss and said, "I've got Gillie in bed with his Teddy Bear and a croup kettle. The twins are having a pillow-fight. I wish you'd go upstairs and calm them down, darling."

"Right," said Lanning. "Excuse me, Gerry. This is my wife, Martha—Gerry Wister. You've heard me speak of him."

A flash of something—fear?—crossed Martha Lanning's well-bred features. Then she was smiling, pouring a drink, telling him he must stay for dinner, that it was a shame the way Brad had let old friendships lapse since their marriage.

"I'd love to—thanks," said Wister. So Brad had been hiding a wife all the time he was engaged to Corinne! No wonder he had seized the chance to vanish. He must have arranged the substitution with his assassins, rigged a deal with the dentist.

THE bourbon flowed smoothly down Wister's throat to expand in pleasant warmth. Brad, he decided, had it very good indeed. Martha, for instance—no show-stopper, perhaps, but with style, charm, a quiet beauty that was bound to grow rather than pall with time. There was something oddly familiar about her—Wister tried to run it down, failed, suppressed a faint tremor of worry.

"...and I'd love to have you see the children, but Gillie has a cold and

it's so contagious this time of year." Martha Lanning talked amiably and aimlessly, after the fashion of wives the world over with unexpected guests for dinner.

"A pity," said Wister. He let her ramble on, tried to work it out—the unexpected house in the unexpected part of town, the unexpected wife and children—above all the strange familiarity of the woman, the flash of emotion that had crossed her face when they were introduced. She was being a shade too trivial, too casual.

And the haunting of the past few days—that would take some explaining, explaining no mere hospitality could wipe from the agenda. He rose when Brad came downstairs, and Martha excused herself to warn the cook of a guest for dinner.

Wister bided his time through a well-served meal whose quality hinted that Brad was indeed doing himself well. Talk remained pleasant if desultory. Brad kept the ball rolling, chatting of his new life, ignoring the old. Martha grew increasingly nervous. She pecked at her food, excused herself with the coffee, with the plea that the children needed her.

There was heavy silence—silence Wister finally broke with, "Well, Brad, haven't we a few things we ought to discuss?"

"Right," said Brad, rising. "Let's get at it. I have a query or two myself." He led the way to a comfortable den at the rear of the house, containing leather easy chairs and sofa, a large desk. Bookcases lined two of the walls, a gun cabinet a third. A large window with drawn blind took up the remaining wall space.

"Still collecting firearms, Brad?" Wister inquired as he accepted a large inhaler of brandy from his host.

"I pick up a gun occasionally," said Lanning. "I still like to hunt. The guns in the lower shelf are oiled up."

Wister eyed the gleaming Belgian shotgun at the far end of the rack,

debated doing the job himself when opportunity offered. This time there would be no question of survival for Lanning. But there were Martha, the servants—too many witnesses to his presence here. An alibi would be costly and difficult if not impossible.

SO IT would have to wait. He sipped his brandy, which was of incredible excellence, said, "All right, Brad—why have you been haunting me this past week?"

"Isn't 'haunting' rather an odd word, Gerry?"

"Hardly—under the circumstances. After all, Brad, you *are* officially dead."

"Thanks to you," said Lanning bluntly. "Gerry, that was a damfool thing to do."

"Maybe," said Wister. "but look at it from my angle—what else *could* I do?"

"Using hired gunmen!" Lanning said savagely.

"You should know," retorted Wister. "Brad, I *had* to have you killed. What I want to know is how you got out of it—how you kept it a secret—why you've been haunting me the last few days?"

"Thanks, Gerry," said Lanning. He pressed a button beneath the desk, added, "Your confession's all on tape." His smile was no longer amiable. "Now I'll answer your questions—gladly."

"Hold it!" Wister was on his feet, his whole body an alarm system. "Your murder has been a closed book for almost three years. You can't hope to reopen it now."

"I don't intend to," said Lanning quietly. "I've done this for Corinne Weir—since she and Dr. Konetowsky managed to get through."

"Get through?" asked Lanning, his throat dry.

"Yes—*through*!" replied Lanning. "When you followed me into the warehouse you entered a gateway between parallel worlds. Dr. Konetowsky

stumbled onto it while working on hyperspace beams for high-speed communication in your world. They built the gateway, came through, found me. We—worked out a little campaign.”

“You’re crazy, Brad,” Gerry Wister’s voice was a croak.

“Am I? Take a look.” Contemptuously Lanning tossed a newspaper from the desk. Wister caught it, studied it. At first glance it looked normal. Then he saw difference in masthead and headlines.

He dived for the financial page, scanned the listing. Many familiar initials were there—along with some absentees and strangers.

“You could have faked this,” said Wister. Even to himself it rang false. There were too many discrepancies—Brad’s resurrection, the strange part of the city, the children, Martha. . . Again he wondered about Martha, about her odd familiarity.

“I didn’t,” said Lanning. “I’m delivering your taped confession to Miss Weir tomorrow. I had to get you here to draw it out of you. You see, Miss Weir wants you punished for killing her fiancée.”

“Then you *aren’t* Bradford Lanning,” cried Wister hoarsely.

“I’m Lanning, all right,” his host stated quietly. “I just don’t happen to be the Lanning you killed. This is another world, one parallel to yours—the other side of the Mobius if you will. But when you go back you’ll go to prison, never fear. You may even die—though this is unlikely in view of the attorneys you will hire.”

“That crime is a closed book,” said Wister. He took two cautious steps toward the gun cabinet. If he could eliminate this other Brad Lanning—and any other course was now unthinkable—he could get back, destroy the gateway, prevent Konetowsky from building another. Gateway between worlds—parallel time-tracks—he could not yet quite believe it. But the A-bomb had taught him to respect sci-

entific theory and its possible translation into fact.

“You’ve had it soft for years now,” said Lanning, turning to pour another brandy. “Why not take your medicine?”

Lanning saw the shells in a box at the bottom of the guncase. He moved swiftly, silently—plucked out the shotgun, loaded it, aimed it almost in single motion. Lanning was just turning back toward him when Wister let him have both barrels.

THE gun emitting a duet of thin coughing sounds—Lanning stood staring at him, unharmed. Then, before Wister could recover from his shock, his host drew a heavy automatic pistol from the desk and calmly shot him through the foot.

“That,” he said, “will hold you until I can get the police here.”

He picked up the telephone, made the call. Then he sat on the desk, pistol in hand, and studied Lanning, who sat on the rug, crying and watching the blood spurt from his smashed bench-made boot. He added, “Martha will have to have the carpet cleaned.”

Stung by his host’s detachment and by his own anguish, Wister cried, “What good will your tape recording do you now?”

“Me? None, naturally,” was the reply. “I didn’t undertake this for profit. But it will explain your disappearance from your own world as a probable suicide. It will enable Corinne to have you declared legally dead, will let her claim a part of your fortune, which will legally be hers thanks to my late namesake’s will.”

“And how are you going to explain *me* in this world?” Wister asked, his face twisted with pain. He whimpered.

“You? Try not to make such a fuss, will you? You’ll wake the children,” said Lanning in reproach. “Why do I have to explain you? By the time the

(Continued on page 97)



THE WHATSITS

By MIRIAM ALLEN de FORD

*When you capture a creature from outer space...
what's the human thing to do?*

I AM Jkerl, Farmer Grade HB No. 78946. Bkad, our local wiseman, has asked me to tell the recording machine what happened.

It is the Season of Water, and I am very busy helping to get the year's supply into our tanks. I woke early today and all my housemates were still sleeping, I decided to go to the river

to start working until they should join me. I filled the wagon with containers and went down.

I was working as hard as a man can with only three hands, when my back eyes caught a glimpse of something peculiar in the sky behind me. I turned, because front eyes always see better, and there was a funny,

little ship in the air almost as long as the wagon. While I watched, it landed in a field away from me, and a lot of tiny creatures poured out of it. I ran over to see them. They were about as high as the ankle of my center leg.

They made a piping noise which was too soft for me to hear. They seemed to have some sort of covering on their bodies, all but their hands and faces, and also on their heads, but this did not seem to be of the same material. I stooped down to look and they were deformed—they had only two legs and two arms apiece, and eyes only in front.

I decided this was something Bkad should know about as soon as possible. As a precaution, to keep them from getting away again, I put their boat in the wagon to take back to the house. It seemed like a miniature rocket ship of a very old variety, such as we have in our museums.

I am sorry that in hurrying, I stepped on two of the creatures and crushed them. I did not do it on purpose, but they were clustered all around me, making that piping noise, and it confused me.

I pushed the button at the house and got Bkad and told him. He said he would come at once. He told me to wake one of my housemates and get him to help me, and to tell him not to say anything yet to anyone about it, in case it might be something which the government wants kept secret. He told me to take along a net, the kind we use to snare the flying animals, and to herd the creatures together under it until he got there.

When I returned, they were all around the two I had accidentally crushed. They had a little instrument, and they were making a hole in the ground and putting the dead ones in it. I could not make them understand that the soil is sacred and nothing dead must go in it. It didn't matter, because when Bkad had taken

them away I could just dig up the dead ones and disintegrate them.

Bkad got there very soon. He was very much interested. We had had a hard time—Mpep, the housemate I awoke, and I—getting the little creatures netted. They fought very hard for such puny mites and kept making that piping noise.

Bkad said the thing to do was to take them to the city, to the big Central Laboratory, so the wisemen could study them, each in his own specialty. He asked me to go with him in his glider, to hold them down when they struggled. I did, and now I am telling about it to the recording machine.

This is all I know. Now I have to get back to the farm to help with the water and disintegrate those dead ones. Bkad says I can borrow his glider. He is going to stay here for a while to study the things.

This is Jkerl, signing off.

THIS is Bkad, Wiseman Grade FC No. 87623. I shall keep a record on the machine as the other wisemen and I study these strange animals.

We put them in a large cage outside of the Central Laboratory where we could watch them at all times. They are not like any other animals any of us has ever seen. They are tool-users, as Farmer Jkerl noticed, and the material on their bodies is clothing and comes off, but not the soft fuzzy material on their heads. Parts of their bodies have this soft, fuzzy material also when you take their clothing off, and there is a little of it on their faces too.

They seem to have some kind of weapons suited to their size and strength. When we shook them out of the net into the cage, one of them pointed a little metal object at me and there was a minute flash and I felt a pin-prick in my foot. I thought it wiser after that to take away everything they had that was separable

from their bodies and to store it where it could be studied at leisure. I ordered Jkerl to send their ship also.

They appear to have difficulty in breathing. We pumped oxygen into the cage, and that relieved them somewhat. Wxur took a specimen out temporarily and X-rayed it, and he says it is no wonder they cannot breathe well. The creature had only one heart, and its lungs were inside the body instead of in a flesh-covered flap outside, as is, of course, the case with human beings.

The first difficulty was to find something they could eat, in order to keep them alive while we do our research. There is probably food in their ship but we haven't got to that yet. I caught a very small flying creature and swallowed it before them to show them it was food. Then I released several more in the cage, but they just let the animals fly around without trying to eat them. Fgorg suggested that maybe they do not eat their food alive, though this seems a strange aberration which I have never heard of in any other animal. However, when I killed a flying animal and threw it in the cage, they did not eat that either.

Then Xsar made a very sensible suggestion. He said the creatures were about the size of a week-old baby, so why not try them on what babies eat—umpwel and klin? We sent for some and pretended to eat a bit to show them, and this time they did try it and seemed to like it. So that problem is settled. They drink a good deal of water for their size. We put a panful in the cage, and they all took turns lapping it up.

Wxur took one specimen away to kill it and dissect it. They all seem more or less alike, and I want to keep as many of them as possible alive to study them. Counting the two Jkerl killed, accidentally, and the one Wxur took, there were originally forty-two of them in all. As far as I can

make out, they are all males. They may reproduce by fission or sporulation, instead of sexually like human beings.

They sleep, however, when exhausted, just as men do. They also excrete like men. And, as I said, they breathe, though with difficulty, because of their deformed condition. How creatures can function with only two eyes, legs, and arms, and one heart, is hard to imagine, but nature is marvellously adaptable.

Since my field is psychology and anthropology, my immediate problem is to establish some means of communication. They must have, at least, a rudimentary intelligence, or they could not have constructed artifacts. I had their piping noise amplified, and it is definitely a language, with ascertainable words.

For obvious reasons, it will be much easier for me to learn their language than to try to teach them ours. I shall proceed as we do with children, pointing to objects and asking their name, and going on from that to abstract ideas. With children, naturally, one tells the name instead of asking it; but the method is the same and should work, if they have the intelligence of a human baby.

It has worked very well. This is two days later, and already we are able to converse in a rudimentary way. Pretty soon I hope to be able to do some real research on them. I noticed that one of them seemed to be their leader, and so I have been concentrating on him, though the others chime in occasionally. I asked him what he was called, and he said something that sounded like Samith. I don't know whether that is his own name or the generic name for their kind. He did not give a number, or define his rank and grade, so probably it is not a personal name.

However, when I call "Sa-mith," he responds and the others do not. I have to talk to them almost in a

whisper; normal tones seem merely to stun them. Of course, I keep the amplifier on them all the time I am listening to them.

One of them seems to have died and has been removed. That leaves thirty-eight at the present count. Wxur says his dissection revealed a number of interesting anomalies which he will add to the record later. But he says in comparison with any known animal, they are more like us ourselves than like any other species.

By now I can speak Sa-mith's language with fair accuracy, so from this point on, I can report definite questions and answers. That does seem to be his personal name, by the way; apparently they don't have numbers. It is a very simple and elementary language and not at all hard to learn once I had the initial clues.

When I asked Sa-mith what kind of animal he and his companions were, he said they were men! I had to laugh; a very dwarfed and abnormal variety of men they would be!

"No," I said, "I am a man, so how can you be?"

He said: "You are a giant."

I know what a giant is; there are the bones of extinct ones in the museums. Well, I suppose that relatively to them, we human beings could be called giants. But that does not account for their strikingly abnormal and defective anatomy.

I call them the Whatsits. It is as good a name for them as any.

Nevertheless, I feel impelled to speak of Sa-mith and all of them as "he" and not as "it."

I asked him about females, and he said certainly they had them. "I wish I had one here now," he added, with the first display of any emotion except anger and fear that I have noted in them. He says the company in his ship was just an all-male expedition, planning not to stay, but to return home.

THIS is the most amazing revelation about the Whatsits to date—their claim to have come from an inhabited planet outside of our solar system.

Everybody with any education at all knows that science has long ago disproved the possibility of any sun other than ours having a habitable satellite, at least anywhere in this galaxy. That is one reason we stopped bothering with rocket ships; after we had thoroughly explored our own solar system and made extensive surveys of the nearer suns outside it, the great Hgras, as his monumental achievement, proved mathematically that ours is the only planet in the galaxy capable of supporting sentient life, and in all probability the only one in the cosmos.

Yet Sa-mith and his companions insist that they come from a planet around a dwarf red star in the constellation Hsuxxa, which they call Lyra.

This is manifestly ridiculous. Yet the question remains, where *do* they come from? Certainly not from our solar system, which is known to us in its entirety. It may be necessary to modify somewhat the conclusions of Hgras.

Wherever their place of origin is, the Whatsits desire very strongly to return to it. That is a problem we shall have to settle. If we let them go, will they not return in perhaps overwhelming numbers? They could well become a minor pest, and perhaps even upset the balance of nature. On the other hand, if we do not let them go, will not others, sooner or later, inevitably follow the same path and arrive here? These specimens, at least, would be enlightened and indoctrinated, and might warn off their kind from other attempts at invasion.

I am in favor of freeing them, after we have completed our study of them and of their ship and equipment, but with the proviso that we have inspired them with sufficient fear of us to make them discourage their race from further expeditions.

One reason I take this attitude is that Sa-mith assures me they had no intention of invading our earth specifically. They were, so to speak, merely scouting around for what they could find; and they found us. I shall discuss the whole question with our Governing Council and see what they think. The creatures will only die on our hands, sooner or later, and nobody wants to be purposelessly cruel.

The amusing thing is that they call their place of residence the Earth, just as they call themselves human beings. I have a hard time convincing Sa-mith that since *this* is the Earth and we are men, no other place or creatures can rightfully claim those names.

We have put their little private belongings back in the cage with them, and placed their ship outside, as Fgadir requested, for his convenience in studying it. They are very funny—whenever he is at work they crowd around the inner wire walls of the cage and watch him intently. They seem to be afraid he will take parts of the ship away, so I told Sa-mith to reassure them—that, at least, until their disposition was decided on by the Council, it would be left intact.

I also warned him sharply not to let any of the Whatsits get near the outer cage wall, as it is wired to disintegrate any living thing that comes in contact with it. He answered very sensibly that they had the same arrangement in what he called “concentration camps”—whatever they are—on his planet (which again he spoke of quaintly as “the Earth”); and that in any case they would never be able to scale the inner wall, which is closely woven and high enough to keep out a human being, let alone a Whatsit.

Since the whole cage is outside the laboratory proper, it occurred to me that they might be more comfortable if we put a floor over part of it, so that they would not have to sleep out-of-doors on the ground. Until it is decided whether we are to keep the

Whatsits here, it is not worth-while to build permanent quarters for them, and in the Season of Water, the days and nights of course are always pleasantly warm.

Sa-mith thanked me for being so thoughtful, but said they enjoyed “camping in the forest.” This puzzled me, until I realized that the short grass growing on the ground of the cage must seem like trees to them!

I told him also that we hold the soil, from which all human beings ultimately sprang, as sacred. I warned him that no unclean or dead thing must ever be placed in it. He said that though they did not share this belief, they would respect it scrupulously.

Then he asked anxiously what had happened to their two companions, accidentally killed by Jkerl and buried by the others. I had to tell him that they had been dug up and disintegrated. When he communicated this news to the rest it seemed to upset them, but Sa-mith calmed them. He then said to me that he understood, and that when in Rome, one must do as the Romans do—which I confess made absolutely no sense to me. Anyway, we had removed immediately the one Whatsit who died in the cage, and would, of course, do the same if any more of them should die.

WE HAVE had a Council meeting, and I was overruled. Wxur's view was that since we keep “living museums” of strange animals, which we have taken from their original homes high in the mountains, or in caves under the earth, revealed during the Season of No Water, why not add these creatures to the collection? Their close resemblance to us humans, he thought, made them more, rather than less, interesting; and if their life-span is as short as we anticipate, the longer we have them on hand to study, the better.

I opposed this reasoning, not only

with the arguments I have given previously in this record, but also on the ground that keeping the Whatsits—my private name for them has caught on, and everybody is using it—is an expensive process, what with the necessity of providing them with a constant supply of oxygen and with a constant diet of unpwel and klin.

We could not find anything in their ship which seemed to us to be in the nature of food; the only objects, whose use we could guess, were some thimble-size cylinders of tin, and it seemed impossible that they could eat these, so I did not even ask Sa-mith about them. In any case, they would not have lasted long when distributed among thirty-eight specimens—I almost said thirty-eight persons.

But I was outvoted, and it was definitely decided that we keep the Whatsits here. An order was given to have a suitable cage with indoor living quarters, erected in the Main Museum of Living Animals, and they are to be transferred as soon as it is ready. We have about completed our intensive study; the creatures have been measured, photographed, examined, X-rayed, and, in one instance, dissected; and I can conduct my psychological research just as well in their new abode as here in the laboratory, where they take up room needed for other experiments.

I had the unpleasant task of breaking the news to Sa-mith. I have actually grown fond of this little being, almost as if he were another human, and I knew this would be a bitter disappointment to him. I confess I was surprised by his reaction and that of the others, and it has made me feel that perhaps some of my work on their mental processes was on the wrong track and will have to be revised.

Instead of showing grief, despair, or even rage, as I had expected, they took it with a quiet indifference amounting to apathy. Sa-mith shrugged

his little shoulders—how funny a shrug looks with only two shoulders engaged!—and said, "Well, that's that. How soon do you move us?"

I told him I didn't know, but that I would notify him a day or two ahead of time, to enable them to pack up their little private belongings. They evidently set great store by these trifles; they are constantly passing around objects and apparently admiring them. Some of them seem to be written documents of some kind, but as I have not yet learned their written language—that must be one of my next tasks—I am not able as yet to say of what their contents consist. However, they also have and display tiny photographs, and these do interest me extremely, since they show the females and young of the species.

So far as I can tell, the females greatly resemble the males, except that they have more of the soft fuzzy growth on their heads, and none at all on their faces or on what can be seen of their bodies. The young are merely smaller editions of their elders (resembling the females rather than the males in the above particulars), from which I deduce that the Whatsits do indeed reproduce just as we do. Yet they do not undergo any metamorphosis or any chrysalis stage, as do some of the creatures on earth.

One other interesting object they possess is an apparatus which Sa-mith solemnly assured me was a wire-recorder! I had to smile at the thought of these wee creatures, transcribing their little voices on this primitive mid-get machine. However, Sa-mith demonstrated its use, with an equally tiny emitter, and with my amplifier on, I was able to hear the transcription fairly well. For my amusement, I presume, what he recorded was a repetition of my instructions as to the sacredness of the soil, and their promise to observe my injunction.

* * * * *

This is Jkerl again. I am here at

the Central Laboratory with Mpep. We have been given the honor (since I was the first person to notify Bkad and Mpep helped me) of transporting the strange creatures to the Main Museum of Living Animals. There will be a big crowd gathered to view the creatures, and it is a great distinction for humble Grade HB farmers like ourselves.

The trip is to be taken tomorrow morning, with the Whatsits, which is what they call them here, in a wagon, and I am to steer it. Their ship will follow in another wagon, steered by Mpep. As a further honor, Bkad has allowed me to make this statement into the machine, so that it will be part of the final record. But not Mpep, because he did not have so important a part in the creatures' capture as I had, and because he is not educated as well as I am, and does not know how to speak smoothly into the recording machine.

THIS is Bkad once more. Arrangements are now completed for the transfer. Sa-mith seems to have become really attached to me. I told him that this did not mean he would not see me again, for even after I return to my duties as local wiseman, I shall visit the museum often and keep up my study of the Whatsits. Nevertheless, he insisted on bidding me a formal farewell, since after today, he will no longer be directly in my charge. He and all thirty-seven of the others filed by, and I think they wanted to shake my hand, which seems to be one of their gestures of amity; but of course, even though I stooped down so they could reach my center hand, they were unable to do more than touch it with their tiny paws, and I was afraid to shake these in turn lest I injure their delicate flesh.

At the end of the ceremony I felt quite touched, and when Sa-mith made a little speech, saying that they were

grateful for my consideration of them and my generous though fruitless efforts for their release, I actually felt tears come into my eyes. (My front eyes, of course; a recent monograph by Tlek has finally given definite proof that only front eyes really secrete tears; the moisture sometimes felt in human back eyes is really only a lubricating fluid, not true tears.)

I am bringing my female, Rguld, and both our young, to see the affair tomorrow.

She has been away ever since the Whatsits arrived, on her regular tour as a Judge of Disputes (Grade FD), and our offspring, a male and a female, have, of course, been in the School for Intellectual Pursuits. But Rguld returned yesterday, and we thought this was an event of sufficient scientific interest to secure a leave of absence for the children, who should fly in before dark this evening.

I apologize for mentioning these personal matters in an official record, but I intend to append a complete list of all those concerned in the examination, transfer, and care of the Whatsits, and I might as well include Rguld and the children here as later.

This is Rguld, Judge of Disputes Grade FD, No. 64982. I hereby attest that on my oath as a human being and to my certain knowledge, my male, Bkad, Wiseman Grade FC, No. 87623, had no information of or part in the unfortunate event of this morning. I am trained to detect truth from falsehood, and complicity or guilty knowledge could not have been concealed from me. I formally protest the Council's vote to degrade him from FC to GJ, and I serve notice that we shall appeal the decision to the Ultimate Board. I make this statement in due legal form as part of the record of the activities in this case of my male, Bkad, Wiseman Grade FC, No. 87623, and I hereby ordain, as a Judge of Disputes Grade FD No. 64982, that this complete record, with anything

which may be added to it hereafter, be made a constituent portion of said writ of appeal. This is Rguld signing off.

This is Bkad. As a part of the appeal attested to just previously in this record by my female, Rguld. Judge of Disputes Grade FD, No. 64982, I report the developments of this morning, with the further asservation that they were as complete a surprise to me as to anyone else. If I have erred, it was through open-mindedness and good faith, and not through deliberation or intent. And I wish to say also that I resent Wxur's calling me, publicly, a gullible idiot, and I charge that such language by one wiseman to another is an indictable slander.

WE MET at the laboratory three hours after dawn. When everything was ready, our delegation—Wxur, Fgadir, Xsar, Fgorg, and I—proceeded to the cage, to open the door, and let the creatures out and around the corner to the runway leading to the wagon. I had taken every precaution against their escape, with guards lining both sides of the runway. My own advice, since the Whatsits were going to be on permanent exhibit at the Main Museum of Living Animals, had been to transfer them quietly and without fuss, at night. It was Fgadir, always eager to curry favor and play up to Wxur's love of publicity, who had put over the idea of the ceremonious transfer. So the public address systems had proclaimed the details, and the road all the way to the Museum was crowded.

Wxur, hurrying forward to display his authority, opened the door.

The Whatsits, one and all, had vanished, and their belongings with them. So had their ship.

The only thing left in the cage—balanced conspicuously on the tips of three blades of grass in the center of the space—was the emitting apparatus of their little wire-recorder.

I am willing to take my share of the blame. Perhaps I was too soft and easygoing, and too credulous. But why should I be degraded, and not Fgadir? It was he, who had insisted on having the ship parked right by the wall, so that if necessary, he could question the Whatsits, through me, concerning it. And it was he who has masterminded this whole public fiasco.

Whether the Council likes it or not, by law, I have a right to say whatever I please in this record. And I say here, and challenge the Ultimate Board to deny it, that if Fgadir were not Wxur's female's brother, the Council would never have excused him and put the whole blame on me. Wxur is my superior in office and has more seniority than I have; he has taken all the credit for what was after all my discovery—because it was I whom the farmer called in when he found the creatures—and I suppose he was expecting to be upgraded for it. So he is taking his chagrin out on me.

"You wanted to let them go in the first place, Bkad," he said sneeringly. "You learned to speak their language, and you've made yourself ridiculous, treating them practically as if they were human like ourselves. I'll never believe you weren't in on the whole thing.

"I accuse you of deliberately letting the creatures escape, in defiance of Council orders, and in disservice to the government and the progress of science, and I hereby degrade you to Grade GJ."

Then he glared at me with both his front eyes, and in front of the others ordered me to turn on the Whatsits' emitter and amplify what he rudely called "your friends' farewell."

It was really too bad of Sa-mith. I had fancied he liked me.

All the recording said was: "We remembered your soil was sacred, Bkad. Every night before we started digging the tunnel farther, we carefully cleaned the shovels."

Robert Ashton faced the most agonizing choice
in the history of man—a choice in
which he could only lose!



ALL THE TIME IN THE WORLD

By ARTHUR C. CLARKE

WHEN THE quiet knock came on the door, Robert Ashton surveyed the room in one swift, automatic movement. Its dull respectability satisfied him and should reassure any visitor. Not that he had any reason to expect the police, but there was no point in taking chances.

"Come in," he said, pausing only to grab Plato's *Dialogues* from the

shelf beside him. Perhaps this gesture was a little too ostentatious, but it always impressed his clients.

The door opened slowly. At first Ashton continued his intent reading, not bothering to glance up. There was the slightest acceleration of his heart, a mild and even exhilarating constriction of the chest. Of course, it couldn't possibly be a flatfoot—someone would

have tipped him off. Still, any unheralded visitor was unusual and thus potentially dangerous.

Ashton laid down the book, glanced towards the door and remarked in a noncommittal voice: "What can I do for you?" He did not get up; such courtesies belonged to a past he had buried long ago. Besides, it was a woman. In the circles he now frequented, women were accustomed to receive jewels and clothes and money—but never respect.

Yet there was something about this visitor that drew him slowly to his feet. It was not merely that she was beautiful, but she had a poised and effortless authority that moved her into a different world from the flamboyant doxies he met in the normal course of business. There was a brain and a purpose behind those calm, appraising eyes—a brain, Ashton suspected, the equal of his own.

He did not know how grossly he had underestimated her.

"Mr. Ashton," she began, "let us not waste time. I know who you are and I have work for you. Here are my credentials."

She opened a large, stylish handbag and extracted a thick bundle of notes.

"You may regard this," she said, "as a sample."

Ashton caught the bundle as she tossed it carelessly towards him. It was the largest sum of money he had ever held in his life—at least a hundred fivers, all new and serially numbered. He felt them between his fingers. If they were not genuine, they were so good that the difference was of no practical importance.

He ran his thumb to and fro along the edge of the wad as if feeling a pack for a marked card, and said thoughtfully, "I'd like to know where you got these. If they aren't forgeries, they must be hot and will take some passing."

"They are genuine. A very short time ago they were in the Bank of

England. But if they are no use to you throw them in the fire I merely let you have them to show that I mean business."

"Go on." He gestured to the only seat and balanced himself on the edge of the table.

She drew a sheaf of papers from the capacious handbag and handed it across to him.

"I am prepared to pay you any sum you wish if you will secure these items and bring them to me, at a time and place to be arranged. What is more, I will guarantee that you can make the thefts with no personal danger."

ASHTON looked at the list, and sighed. The woman was mad. Still, she had better be humoured. There might be more money where this came from.

"I notice," he said mildly, "that all these items are in the British Museum, and that most of them are, quite literally, priceless. By that I mean that you could neither buy nor sell them."

"I do not wish to sell them. I am a collector."

"So it seems. What are you prepared to pay for these acquisitions?"

"Name a figure."

There was a short silence. Ashton weighed the possibilities. He took a certain professional pride in his work, but there were some things that no amount of money could accomplish. Still, it would be amusing to see how high the bidding would go.

He looked at the list again.

"I think a round million would be a very reasonable figure for this lot," he said ironically.

"I fear you are not taking me very seriously. With your contacts, you should be able to dispose of these."

There was a flash of light and something sparkled through the air. Ashton caught the necklace before it hit the ground, and despite himself was unable to suppress a gasp of

amazement. A fortune glittered through his fingers. The central diamond was the largest he had ever seen—it must be one of the world's most famous jewels.

His visitor seemed completely indifferent as he slipped the necklace into his pocket. Ashton was badly shaken; he knew she was not acting. To her, that fabulous gem was of no more value than a lump of sugar. This was madness on an unimaginable scale.

"Assuming that you can deliver the money," he said, "how do you imagine that it's physically possible to do what you ask? One might steal a single item from this list, but within a few hours the Museum would be solid with police."

With a fortune already in his pocket, he could afford to be frank. Besides, he was curious to learn more about his fantastic visitor.

She smiled, rather sadly, as if humouring a backward child.

"If I show you the way," she said softly, "will you do it?"

"Yes—for a million."

"Have you noticed anything strange since I came in? Is it not—very quiet?"

Ashton listened. My God, she was right! This room was never completely silent, even at night. There had been a wind blowing over the rooftops; where had it gone now? The distant rumble of traffic had ceased; five minutes ago he had been cursing the engines shunting in the marshalling yard at the end of the road. What had happened to them?

"Go to the window."

He obeyed the order and drew aside the grimy lace curtains with fingers that shook slightly despite all attempt at control. Then he relaxed. The street was quite empty, as it often was at this time in the mid-morning. There was no traffic, and hence no reason for sound. Then he glanced down the row of dingy houses towards the shunting yard.

His visitor smiled as he stiffened with the shock.

"Tell me what you see, Mr. Ashton."

He turned slowly, face pale and throat muscles working.

"What are you?" he gasped. "A witch?"

"Don't be foolish. There is a simple explanation. It is not the world that has changed—but you."

Ashton stared again at that unbelievable shunting engine, the plume of steam frozen motionless above it as if made from cotton wool. He realised now that the clouds were equally immobile; they should have been scudding across the sky. All around him was the unnatural stillness of the high-speed photograph, the vivid unreality of a scene glimpsed in a flash of lightning.

"You are intelligent enough to realise what is happening, even if you cannot understand how it is done. Your timescale has been altered: a minute in the outer world would be a year in this room."

Again she opened the handbag, and this time brought forth what appeared to be a bracelet of some silvery metal, with a series of dials and switches moulded into it.

"You can call this a personal generator," she said. "With it strapped about your arm, you are invincible. You can come and go without hindrance—you can steal everything on that list and bring it to me before one of the guards in the Museum has blinked an eyelid. When you have finished, you can be miles away before you switch off the field and step back into the normal world."

"Now listen carefully, and do exactly what I say. The field has a radius of about seven feet, so you must keep at least that distance from any other person. Secondly, you must not switch it off again until you have completed your task and I have given you your payment. *This is most im-*

portant. Now, the plan I have worked out is this...."

NO CRIMINAL in the history of the world had ever possessed such power. It was intoxicating—yet Ashton wondered if he would ever get used to it. He had ceased to worry about explanations, at least until the job was done and he had collected his reward. Then, perhaps, he would get away from England and enjoy a well-earned retirement.

His visitor had left a few minutes ahead of him, but when he stepped out into the street the scene was completely unchanged. Though he had prepared for it, the sensation was still unnerving. Ashton felt an impulse to hurry, as if this condition couldn't possibly last and he had to get the job done before the gadget ran out of juice. But that, he had been assured, was impossible.

In the High Street he slowed down to look at the frozen traffic, the paralyzed pedestrians. He was careful, as he had been warned, not to approach so close to anyone that they came within his field. How ridiculous people looked when one saw them like this, robbed of such grace as movement could give, their mouths half-open in foolish grimaces!

Having to seek assistance went against the grain, but some parts of the job were too big for him to handle by himself. Besides, he could pay liberally and never notice it. The main difficulty, Ashton realised, would be to find someone who was intelligent enough not to be scared—or so stupid that he would take everything for granted. He decided to try the first possibility.

Tony Marchetti's place was down a side street so close to the police station that one felt it was really carrying camouflage too far. As he walked past the entrance, Ashton caught a glimpse of the duty sergeant at his desk and resisted a temptation to go

inside to combine a little pleasure with business. That sort of thing could wait until later.

The door of Tony's opened in his face as he approached. It was such a natural occurrence in a world where nothing was normal that it was a moment before Ashton realised its implications. Had his generator failed? He glanced hastily down the street and was reassured by the frozen tableau behind him.

"Well, if it isn't Bob Ashton!" said a familiar voice. "Fancy meeting you as early in the morning as this. That's an odd bracelet you're wearing. I thought I had the only one."

"Hello, Aram," replied Ashton. "It looks as if there's a lot going on that neither of us knows about. Have you signed up Tony, or is he still free?"

"Sorry. We've a little job which will keep him busy for a while."

"Don't tell me. It's at the National Gallery or the Tate."

Aram Albenkian fingered his neat goatee. "Who told you that?" he asked.

"No one. But, after all, you *are* the crookedest art dealer in the trade, and I'm beginning to guess what's going on. Did a tall, very good-looking brunette give you that bracelet and a shopping list?"

"I don't see that I should tell you, but the answer's no. It was a man."

Ashton felt a momentary surprise. Then he shrugged his shoulders. "I might have guessed that there would be more than one of them. I'd like to know who's behind it."

"Have you any theories?" said Albenkian guardedly.

Ashton decided that it would be worth risking some loss of information to test the other's reactions. "It's obvious they're not interested in money—they have all they want and can get more with this gadget. The woman who saw me said she was a collector. I took it as a joke, but I see now that she meant it seriously."

"Why do we come into the picture? What's to stop them doing the whole job themselves?" Albenkian asked.

"Maybe they're frightened. Or perhaps they want out—er—specialized knowledge. Some of the items on my list are rather well cased in. My theory is that they're agents for a mad millionaire."

It didn't hold water, and Ashton knew it. But he wanted to see which leaks Albenkian would try to plug.

"My dear Ashton," said the other impatiently, holding up his wrist. "How do you explain this little thing? I know nothing about science, but even I can tell that it's beyond the wildest dreams of our technologies. There's only one conclusion to be drawn from that."

"Go on."

"These people are from—somewhere else. Our world is being systematically looted of its treasures. You know all this stuff you read about rockets and spaceships? Well, someone else has done it first."

Ashton didn't laugh. The theory was no more fantastic than the facts.

"Whoever they are," he said, "they seem to know their way around pretty well. I wonder how many teams they've got? Perhaps the Louvre and the Prado are being reconnoitered at this very minute. The world is going to have a shock before the day's out."

They parted amicably enough, neither confiding any details of real importance about his business. For a fleeting moment Ashton thought of trying to buy over Tony, but there was no point in antagonizing Albenkian. Steven Regan would have to do. That meant walking about a mile, since of course any form of transport was impossible. He would die of old age before a bus completed the journey. Ashton was not clear what would happen if he attempted to drive a car when the field was operating, and he had been warned not to try any experiments.

IT ASTONISHED Ashton that even such a nearly certifiable moron as Steve could take the accelerator so calmly; there was something to be said, after all, for the comic strips which were probably his only reading. After a few words of grossly simplified explanation, Steve buckled on the spare wristlet which, rather to Ashton's surprise, his visitor had handed over without comment. Then they set out on their long walk to the Museum.

Ashton, or his client, had thought of everything. They stopped once at a park bench to rest and enjoy some sandwiches and regain their breath. When at last they reached the Museum, neither felt any the worse for the unaccustomed exercise.

They walked together through the gates of the Museum—unable, despite logic, to avoid speaking in whispers—and up the wide stone steps into the entrance hall. Ashton knew his way perfectly. With whimsical humour he displayed his Reading Room ticket as they walked, at a respectful distance, past the statuesque attendants. It occurred to him that the occupants of the great chamber, for the most part, looked just the same as they normally did, even without the benefit of the accelerator.

It was a straightforward but tedious job collecting the books that had been listed. They had been chosen, it seemed, for their beauty as works of art as much as their literary contents. The selection had been done by someone who knew his job. Had *they* done it themselves, Ashton wondered, or had they bribed other experts as they were bribing him? He wondered if he would ever glimpse the full ramifications of their plot.

There was a considerable amount of panel-smashing to be done, but Ashton was careful not to damage any books, even the unwanted ones. Whenever he had collected enough volumes to make a comfortable load, Steve car-

ried them out into the courtyard and dumped them on the paving stones until a small pyramid had accumulated.

It would not matter if they were left for short periods outside the field of the accelerator. No one would notice their momentary flicker of existence in the normal world.

They were in the library for two hours of their time, and paused for another snack, before passing to the next job. On the way Ashton stopped for a little private business. There was a tinkle of glass as the tiny case, standing in solitary splendor, yielded up its treasure: then the manuscript of "Alice" was safely tucked into Ashton's pocket.

Among the antiquities, he was not quite so much at home. There were a few examples to be taken from every gallery, and sometimes it was hard to see the reasons for the choice. It was as if—and again he remembered Albenkian's words—these works of art had been selected by someone with totally alien standards. This time, with a few exceptions, *they* had obviously not been guided by the experts.

For the second time in history the case of the Portland Vase was shattered. In five seconds, thought Ashton, the alarms would be going all over the Museum and the whole building would be in an uproar. And in five seconds he could be miles away. It was an intoxicating thought, and as he worked swiftly to complete his contract he began to regret the price he had asked. Even now, it was not too late.

HE FELT the quiet satisfaction of the good workman as he watched Steve carry the great silver tray of the Mildenhall Treasure out into the courtyard and place it beside the now impressive pile. "That's the lot," he said. "I'll settle up at my place this evening. Now let's get this gadget off you."

They walked out into High Holborn

and chose a secluded side street that had no pedestrians near it. Ashton unfastened the peculiar buckle and stepped back from his cohort, watching him freeze into immobility as he did so. Steve was vulnerable again, moving once more with all other men in the stream of time. But before the alarm had gone out he would have lost himself in the London crowds.

When he re-entered the Museum yard, the treasure had already gone. Standing where it had been was his visitor of—how long ago? She was still poised and graceful, but Ashton thought, looking a little tired. He approached until their fields merged and they were no longer separated by an impassable gulf of silence. "I hope you're satisfied," he said. "How did you move the stuff so quickly?"

She touched the bracelet round her own wrist and gave a wan smile. "We have many other powers besides this."

"Then why did you need my help?"

"There were technical reasons. It was necessary to remove the objects we required from the presence of other matter. In this way, we could gather only what we needed and not waste our limited—what shall I call them?—transporting facilities. Now may I have the bracelet back?"

Ashton slowly handed over the one he was carrying, but made no effort to unfasten his own. There might be danger in what he was doing, but he intended to retreat at the first sign of it.

"I'm prepared to reduce my fee," he said. "In fact I'll waive all payment—in exchange for this." He touched his wrist, where the intricate metal band gleamed in the sunlight.

She was watching him with an expression as fathomless as the Gioconda smile. (Had *that*, Ashton wondered, gone to join the treasure he had gathered? How much had they taken from the Louvre?)

"I would not call that reducing your

fee. All the money in the world could not purchase one of those bracelets."

"Or the things I have given you."

"You are greedy, Mr. Ashton. You know that with an accelerator the world would be yours."

"What of that? Do you have any further interest in our planet, now you have taken what you need?"

There was a pause. Then, unexpectedly, she smiled. "So you have guessed I do not belong to your world."

"Yes. And I know that you have other agents besides myself. Do you come from Mars, or won't you tell me?"

"I am quite willing to tell you. But you may not thank me if I do."

ASHTON looked at her warily. What did she mean by that? Unconscious of his action, he put his wrist behind his back, protecting the bracelet.

"No, I am not from Mars, or any planet of which you have ever heard. You would not understand *what* I am. Yet I will tell you this. I am from the Future."

"The Future! That's ridiculous!"

"Indeed? I should be interested to know why."

"If that sort of thing were possible, our past history would be full of time-travellers. Besides, it would involve a *reductio ad absurdum*. Going into the past could change the present and produce all sorts of paradoxes."

"Those are good points, though not perhaps as original as you suppose. But they only refute the possibility of time-travel in general, not in the very special case which concerns us now."

"What is peculiar about it?"

"On very rare occasions, and by the release of an enormous amount of energy, it is possible to produce a—*singularity*—in time. During the fraction of a second when that singularity occurs, the past becomes accessible to the future, though only in a restricted

way. We can send our minds back to you, but not our bodies."

"You mean," gasped Ashton, "that you are *borrowing* the body I see here?"

"Oh, I have paid for it, as I am paying you. The owner has agreed to the terms. We are very conscientious in these matters."

Ashton was thinking swiftly. If this story was true, it gave him a definite advantage.

"You mean," he continued, "that you have no direct control over matter, and must work entirely through human agents?"

"Yes. Even those bracelets were made here, under our mental control."

She was explaining too much too readily, revealing all her weaknesses. A warning signal was flashing in the back of Ashton's mind, but he had committed himself too deeply to retreat.

"Then it seems to me," he said slowly, "that you cannot force me to hand this bracelet back."

"That is perfectly true."

"That's all I want to know."

She was smiling at him now, and there was something in that smile that chilled him to the marrow.

"We are not vindictive or unkind, Mr. Ashton," she said quietly. "What I am going to do now appeals to my sense of justice. You have asked for that bracelet; you can keep it. Now I shall tell you just how useful it will be."

For a moment Ashton had a wild impulse to hand back the accelerator. She must have guessed his thoughts.

"No, it's too late. I insist that you keep it. And I can reassure you on one point. It won't wear out. It will last you—" again that enigmatic smile —"the rest of your life."

"Do you mind if we go for a walk, Mr. Ashton? I have done my work here, and would like to have a last glimpse of your world before I leave

it forever."

She turned towards the iron gates, and did not wait for a reply. Consumed by curiosity, Ashton followed.

THEY walked in silence until they were standing among the frozen traffic of Tottenham Court Road. For a while she stood staring at the busy yet motionless crowds; then she sighed.

"I cannot help feeling sorry for them, and for you. I wonder what you would have made of yourselves."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Just now, Mr. Ashton, you implied that the future cannot reach back into the past, because that would alter history. A shrewd remark, but, I am afraid, irrelevant. You see, *your* world has no more history to alter."

She pointed across the road, and Ashton turned swiftly on his heels. There was nothing there except a newsboy crouching over his pile of papers. A placard formed an impossible curve in the breeze that was blowing through this motionless world. Ashton read the crudely lettered words with difficulty:

SUPER-BOMB TEST TODAY

The voice in his ears seemed to come from a very long way off.

"I told you that time-travel, even in this restricted form, requires an enormous release of energy—far more than a single bomb can liberate, Mr. Ashton. But that bomb is only a trigger—"

She pointed to the solid ground beneath their feet. "Do you know anything about your own planet? Probably not; your race has learned so little. But even your scientists have discovered that, two thousand miles down, the Earth has a dense, liquid core. That core is made of compressed

matter, and it can exist in either of two stable states. Given a certain stimulus, it can change from one of those states to another, just as a seesaw can tip over at the touch of a finger. But that change, Mr. Ashton, will liberate as much energy as all the earthquakes since the beginning of your world. The oceans and continents will fly into space, the Sun will have a second asteroid belt.

"That cataclysm will send its echoes down the ages, and will open up to us a fraction of a second in your time. During that instant, we are trying to save what we can of your world's treasures. It is all that we can do; even if your motives were purely selfish and completely dishonest, you have done your race a service you never intended.

"And now I must return to our ship, where it waits by the ruins of Earth almost a hundred thousand years from now. You can keep the bracelet."

The withdrawal was instantaneous. The woman suddenly froze and became one with the other statues in the silent street. He was alone.

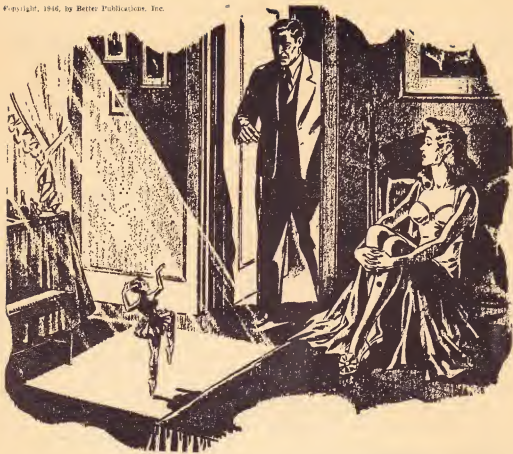
Alone! Ashton held the gleaming bracelet before his eyes, hypnotized by its intricate workmanship and by the powers it concealed. He had made a bargain, and he must keep it. He could live out the full span of his life—at the cost of an isolation no other man had ever known. If he switched off the field, the last seconds of history would tick inexorably away.

Seconds? Indeed, there was less time than that. For he knew that the bomb must already have exploded.

He sat down on the edge of the pavement and began to think. There was no need to panic; he must take things calmly, without hysteria. After all, he had plenty of time.

All the time in the world.





By HENRY KUTTNER

THE DARK ANGEL

Tim Hathaway sensed that his wife was growing different—but it took him a long time to learn just why

JUKE-BOX music roared through the smoky gin-mill. The old man I was looking for sat in a booth far back, staring at nothing, his shaking, veined hands gripping a tiny glass. I recognized him.

He was the one. He could tell me what I wanted to know. After what I had seen tonight at the Metropolitan—

He was already drunk. His eyes were dull and glazed. As I slid into the booth beside him, I heard him mumbling something, over and over.

"The doll—Joanna, you shouldn't—Joanna—"

He was lost in the dream-world of alcoholism. He saw me, and he didn't see me. I was one of the phantoms of memory that thronged about him.

"Tell me about it," I said.

And even that, from a stranger, couldn't penetrate the mists that fogged his brain. The soul was gone from him. He reacted like a puppet to my words. Once or twice I had to put a few questions to him, but he answered them—

and went on—coming back always to Joanna, and the doll.

I was sorry for him. He was already damned. But it was my business to find out the truth about what had happened at the Metropolitan an hour ago.

"A long time ago," he said thickly. "That's when it started. The night we had that big snowfall, when—or even before that? I don't know."

He didn't know. Later, after the change had begun to be noticeable, he tried to remember, to dredge from his memory tiny incidents that might have been significant. Yet how was he to tell with any certainty?

Gestures, words, actions that might once have seemed perfectly normal were now, in retrospect, freighted with a subtle flavor of horrible uncertainty. But on the night of the snowstorm he had first begun to wonder.

He was forty then, Joanna thirty-five. They had begun to consider settling down to a comfortable middle age, and there was no reason why they shouldn't. Tim Hathaway had risen, in twenty years, from a junior clerk in an advertising firm to general manager, with a good salary and no worries worth mentioning.

They had an apartment in Manhattan, and a bad-tempered little Pekinese named Tzu-Ling. There were no children. Both Tim and Joanna would have welcomed a couple of kids, but it just hadn't turned out that way.

A nice-looking pair, the Hathaways—Joanna with her hair still jet-black her skin smooth and unlined, and a fresh, sparkling vigor about her—Tim a solid, quiet man with a gentle face and streaks of gray at his temples.

They were beginning to be invited to dinners with the conservative set, but every so often they'd have a quiet binge to keep the grass green.

"But not too green," Joanna said, as the big sedan tooted down the Henry Hudson Parkway with flurries of snow racing toward the windshield. "That gin wasn't so hot."

"Cigarette, please, dear," Tim said. "Thanks. Well, I don't know where Sanderson gets his liquor, but I think he must dredge it up out of the East River. My stomach's rumbling."

"Watch that—" She spoke too late. Out of the blurry storm twin headlights rushed at them.

Tim swung the wheel desperately and felt the sick twisting of gravity that meant a bad skid. In a moment the sedan jolted and stopped. Tim cursed quietly and got out.

"Our rear wheels are in the ditch," he told Joanna through the open window. "You'd better get out. Even with our lights on, a car wouldn't be able to see us till it was too late."

He contemplated the prospect of having the sedan smashed into a heap of junk, and it seemed the likeliest possibility. As Joanna's fur-coated figure joined him, he bent, gripped the rear bumper and heaved mightily. But he couldn't budge the car's enormous weight.

Grunting, he let go.

"I'll see if I can gun her out," he said. "Wait out here a minute, Jo, and yell if a car comes."

"Okay."

HE played the clutch and gunned the motor. Then, with catastrophic suddenness, he saw the reflected gleam of headlights approaching.

It was too late to avoid a crash. He jammed his foot on the accelerator, felt the rear wheels skid around without traction—and suddenly, incredibly, the car *jumped*. There was no other word for it. Someone or something had lifted the sedan and thrust it forward on to the road.

Instinctive reflex made him jockey accelerator and steering-wheel. The other car sped by, missing him by a fraction. White-faced, Tim eased the sedan to the side of the road and got out.

A dark figure loomed through the snowy gusts.

"Joanna?"

There was a pause.

"Yes, Tim."

"What happened?"

"I—don't know."

"You didn't try to lift the car!" But he knew that was impossible.

Yet Joanna hesitated.

"No," she said suddenly. "There must have been solid ground under the snow back there."

"Sure," Tim said. He got a flashlight, went back to the ditch, and made a brief examination.

"Yeah," he said unconvinced.

They were both silent on the way home. Tim had caught a glimpse of Joanna's grease-smeared gloves.

A small thing—yet it was the beginning. For Tim knew quite well that the car had been *lifted* out of the ditch, and a frail woman of Joanna's build couldn't possibly have managed it.

But their doctor, Farleigh, an endocrinologist, talked to Tim a few weeks later.

"Tell Joanna to come in and see me," he said. "She hasn't been around for quite a while."

"She's healthy enough," Tim said.

Farleigh put his fingertips together.

"Is she?"

"She's never sick."

"She may be. One of these days."

"There's nothing—"

"I want to keep an eye on her," Farleigh said. "I want to give her another complete check-up—x-rays and everything."

Tim took out a cigarette and lighted it very carefully.

"Okay. Let's have it. What's wrong?"

"I didn't say."

Tim looked at him. Farleigh scowled and took some x-ray plates from his drawer.

"Changes take place," he said. "The glands have a lot to do with it. I'm wondering if I haven't made a mistake."

"How?"

"If I called in a specialist. Joanna is

—ah—it may be a form of hypothyroidism. Her skin, the exoderm, is thickening."

"I hadn't noticed."

"You wouldn't. Unless you tried to put a hypodermic needle through it. These x-rays—" He seemed oddly reluctant to show them to Tim.

"I gave her a gastro-intestinal series, and some iodine stains. One way to get a look at interior organs. It's peculiar. There's some sort of intestinal atrophy—the appendix has entirely disappeared, and the heart's much enlarged. Other things—"

"What?"

"Probably nothing," Farleigh said, putting the plates away again. "Just ask Joanna to run in and see me, will you?"

"Yeah," Tim said and left.

When he got home that night, the living room was dark and empty. A low crooning noise came from the bedroom. He went quietly to the door and looked in. He couldn't see Joanna, but he saw something else, moving across the floor.

It might have been the Pekingese, except that it was even smaller than Tzu-Ling, and it *walked*, with the automatic precision of a clockwork figure.

The low crooning changed pitch. It became insistent. The tiny figure altered its movement. It attempted something grotesquely like a ballet position, an *entrechat* and an *arabesque*, which it couldn't hold. It fell with a soft thump on the carpet.

The crooning stopped.

"Tim?" Joanna said.

His middle cold and wet with sweat, Tim stepped into the bedroom and switched on the light. Joanna was sitting on the bed, her knees drawn up. For a moment he thought of how lovely she was, her dark hair tumbling in ringlets, her face bright and interested like a girl of seventeen. Then he looked down.

A few years ago, a casual friend had given Joanna a doll, an expensive one,

completely articulated and quite life-like, for all its tinyness. It was a foot and a half high. Now it lay crumpled at Tim's feet.

He forced himself to stoop and pick it up. The wig felt like real hair under his fingers.

"Joanna," he said, and an empty, gray helplessness gripped him as he stared at his wife. For he knew what he had seen. It was impossible, but the moonlight had been sufficiently bright. The movements of the doll had been those of a puppet or an automaton.

AND she knew that he had seen. She drew her robe closer about her shoulders, shivering. "Close the window, Tim, will you, please? It's cold."

He obeyed silently. By the time he faced her again, she had made her decision.

"Sit down, Tim," she said, patting the bed beside her. "Put the doll here. It won't move now. Not unless I... Tim, I don't know if you'll understand. If you *can* understand. But I hope you do."

"And I—rather hope that I'm insane," he said slowly. "What is it, Joanna? *For heaven's sake!*"

"Don't. It's nothing terrible. I've felt it coming for a long while now. I'm changing—that's all."

"Changing?"

"I was afraid at first. But now I—my mind works so much better. So does my body. I can feel things—sense things—and the doll was just an experiment. I can control inanimate objects from a distance. It takes practice.

"I did it with the car, that night in the snowstorm. Didn't you notice how white I was—after? It drained so much of my energy. But I could do it now without any difficulty at all."

"Joanna," he said, "I think you're insane."

She looked away.

"It's hard to begin at the beginning," she said reflectively.

"I've come so far since—since I noticed there *was* a change. And I'm so far beyond you now, Tim. I can see into your mind, and it's full of blocks and walls that won't let truth in."

"How did you make that doll move?"

Her dark eyes watched him for a moment. Then something cold and very strange seemed to lance into his brain, a whirling maelstrom like a twisting snow-flurry.

It was gone instantly. But now Joanna's voice seemed stronger and clearer. And he could understand, curiously, without questioning, what she was saying.

And—in essence—what she said was this—she was becoming a completely new type of human being. *Human* didn't describe it too accurately. As man evolved, through mutation, an enormous step beyond Neanderthaler, so the new race would come, similarly through mutation.

"But not in the conventional way, Tim. Not the way fiction writers have it. There won't be babies born with heads three feet in diameter and shriveled little bodies. Nothing like that.

"The higher an animal in the evolutionary scale, the longer is the period before maturity. It's natural selection. The super-race wouldn't be safe if it revealed its superiority too soon. It's protective camouflage.

"I think I'm the first mutation of this type, Tim. And not until lately—thirty-five years after my birth—have I begun to mature. Till now, I was adolescent—*merely human.*"

There had been unsuccessful mutations in the past—freaks, abortions, failures. But more and more often now the mutations would occur.

"And we'll breed true. It may take many, many years before another super-human of my type appears. But I don't think I'll die for a long time. It's taken me thirty-five years to mature, so—"

She flung out her arms.

"And I'll change! *I'll change!* I'm seeing the world through new eyes now, the eyes of an adult! Up until now I've been like a child!"

Her eyes glowed.

"There will be more of us. I think I know how it happened in my case. You remember my father? He was connected with the Museum. Before my birth, he was out with that research expedition in Mexico, investigating the great meteoric crater there. My mother was with him.

"The radiations from that buried meteor brought about some rearrangement of genes in the germ-plasm, so the mutation was successful. And now there's so much new work in electronics. So much radiation being broadcast! I'm the only one of my kind now, but in a hundred years, or less—"

Tim looked at her. Yes, she had changed. He could see that now. She looked quite different, with an odd combination of new youthfulness and an underlying firm self-realization—a new maturity.

And there was more than that. As a child gains an intangible quality when he matures, so Joanna had gained something that was no more to be described than the blaze of a candle-flame shining through thin white porcelain.

Yet she was—Joanna. He knew, deep in his mind, how illogical her words were. But he could not disbelieve them. It was as though unseen fingers had reached out and moulded his thoughts into new patterns.

Tim reached for his wife's hand. That, at least, was familiar. The slim fingers lay warm and relaxed against his palm. He tightened his grip.

There was nothing to say, against the overpowering certainty, the deep belief, that possessed him. She had made him believe, somehow.

"Joanna," he whispered. "You mustn't."

HE shook her head.

"You mustn't," he repeated. "So it's happened once. Once in

a million years it could happen like this—perhaps. But you can change it."

"I can't," she said. "A plant can't stop growing. It can't grow down again into a seed."

"What about us?"

"I don't know." Her voice was sombre. "I don't think we can go on this way—not for long."

"You know I—"

"And I love you, too, Tim. But I'm afraid. You see, I love Tzu-Ling in a different way. He's an inferior species. Later after I've matured farther, you might be an inferior species to me too."

"You mean I am now," he said bitterly.

"No, Tim. You're not! But don't you see—I can't help this change. I can't stop it. And eventually we'll grow farther and farther apart, until—"

"Tzu-Ling. I see."

"And that would be horrible. For both of us. It might not be for me—then. It would depend on how much I'd changed by that time. But you understand, darling, don't you? It's better to make the break now so we'll each have the right memories."

"No," he said, "I don't see that at all. There couldn't be any change that couldn't be compensated for."

"Human logic, based on emotion. You know it isn't true."

"You mustn't leave me, Joanna."

"I won't go tonight, anyway," she said, looking away. "I'm still too human. That makes me vulnerable. I think, in the end, *our* race will conquer and rule because we won't be vulnerable through emotions. We'll have emotions, yes, but they won't rule us. Logic will be the highest law."

Tim flung the doll into a corner, where it lay crumpled grotesquely. Tzu-Ling awakened at the noise and padded in from the next room to sniff at the doll. Satisfied, he lay down, head on his fluffy golden paws, and slept again.

But Tim did not sleep well that night. For a long while he lay awake.

listening to Joanna's quiet breathing beside him, watching her profile in the faint moonlight. He was remembering a great deal. In the end he had come to no conclusion.

He slept at last.

And in the morning Joanna was gone.

For a year there was no trace of her. Tim put a detective agency on the track without result. He told no one the truth. They would not have believed. And he felt that if they *did* believe. . . .

Sometimes he had a sickening picture of Joanna, outcast and alien, hunted like an animal by the humans who were no longer akin to her. He did hint a little to Dr. Farleigh, but the physician was so obviously skeptical that Tim didn't pursue the subject.

He waited, though, and followed the newspapers avidly. Somewhere, sometime, he felt, he would see Joanna's face looking up at him from a halftone reproduction, or read her name in some newsy item.

When it came, Tim almost missed it. He had read and finished the weekly news-magazine, cast it aside and was smoking idly, listening to the radio, Joanna's face kept materializing in his thoughts. It wasn't quite the same—there was some subtle difference.

Then he knew. He picked up the magazine, found the photograph and examined it closely. It wasn't Joanna. It didn't look like her at all.

And yet, beyond the contour of cheek and jaw, beyond the outward difference, there was something of Joanna in the picture. It was impossible that the bony structure of the skull could have changed. And it was equally impossible that Joanna could have grown younger. This woman was scarcely twenty.

Quite young, Tim thought, for her to have such a remarkable discovery in the electronic-radiation field. Unless—

He took a plane to Berkeley, California, the next morning. He did not

see Marion Parkhurst—that was the girl scientist's name. She had left for a brief vacation in the Rockies—a vacation from which she didn't return.

Marion Parkhurst dropped out of sight.

FOR two years after that nothing happened. There were a few new inventions patented and put on the market, all of them connected with radiations—an ingenious improvement on the magnetron, for example, and a gadget that brought a new concept into the television field. Little things, none of them important singly, but Tim kept a scrapbook.

Five years.

Seven years.

Ten years.

He had not forgotten. He would never forget, while he lived. Tim had loved Joanna very deeply, and sometimes, in his dreams, he would be St. George, rescuing Joanna from a dragon that wore the terrible shape of the future.

Sometimes he saw that future in his dreams—a world peopled by men and women like gods, alicen and inhuman as gods. They were giants and crushed humans like ants beneath their titan feet.

But giants could be killed, Tim knew. The mutation was more deadly, for it masqueraded as human. It had been ten years since Joanna's disappearance, and during that decade she had not been unmasked. She had been perfectly free to do—what?

Fifteen years.

Seventeen.

And then, one warm summer night in Central Park, he saw her again. Some fantastic radiation from her mind must have impinged on his. For she wasn't Joanna any more. She didn't look like Joanna, or walk like Joanna.

After he had stopped her, Tim had a sick feeling that he must be mistaken. But he gripped her arms and swung her about into the glare of an overhead light. She could have wrenched

free. Tim was sixty-two and older than his years.

She stood there, waiting, watching him while he searched her face. He could have seen more clearly with his glasses, but he felt embarrassed about putting them on. Not that his age didn't show clearly in his face, but—

She was between twenty and twenty-five, he guessed, and she bore not the slightest resemblance to Joanna. He didn't look for anything physical, though. He searched for that burning, ardent spark, more than human, that blazed within her like incandescent flame.

It was not there.

So he had been wrong. It was another false hope, after so many others. Tim's shoulders slumped. He felt very weary and very old. He muttered something—an apology—and turned away. Then a slim hand touched his arm.

"Tim," she said.

He looked at her, incredulous. It wasn't possible. It couldn't be happening after seventeen years. This girl didn't have the—the flame.

She read his thought. She leaned toward him, and that tremendous wave of vitality, of godlike fire, pulsed out from her. Tim was shaken by its strength.

"Joanna," he said. "You can't be—"

"I learned," she said very softly. "I learned to control the Power. It was too dangerous. Men might have learned to recognize me by it."

He couldn't say anything. He fumbled for her hand, but she drew away.

"Don't touch me, Tim," she said. "It's a mistake. I shouldn't have—but when I read your mind and saw all that lost, lonely unhappiness—I couldn't let you go without—"

"I'll never let you go now," he said.

"You've forgotten. I've changed—more than you realize now."

"It's you who've forgotten. Look." He swept out an arm, indicating the tremendous lighted towers of New York

that stood like cyclopean guardians ringing the Park.

This had been their favorite view when they were first married. On such warm summer evenings as this they had walked together along the dim paths, listening to the distant music of the carousel, laughing at nothing, talking.

He dropped his hand quickly. The light had mercilessly revealed the brown-splotted skin, the blue veins of age.

"Do you think age matters?" Joanna asked. "I could make you young again, Tim. But you'd still be human. And I'm not anymore."

"You could do that?"

"Yes. My power has grown. But it's a question of different species, not of age."

"Joanna," he said, "what do you want? What are you trying to do?"

"Now?" She smiled a little crookedly. "I'm just waiting. For many years I did electronic research, trying to cause an artificial mutation that would duplicate my own."

"But I failed. I'm afraid there's nobody else like me on earth, Tim, and perhaps there never will be. I'll live for a long time—a thousand years or more—and I'll be very lonely. I'm lonely now."

"My heritage—a new race—sustained me for years, but I've waited until I know how hopeless my wait may be. I'm the first of the new race, and I may be the last."

"Give it up," he said. "You've wasted years."

"I have so many. Too many."

"Come back to me, Joanna. Forget all—"

For an instant he thought she was on the verge of yielding. But something stirred in the bushes near them. A shaggy, unkempt form loomed in the light, black against the green. Tim saw Joanna turn her head. He felt that tremendous wave of power beat out, and he was suddenly blind and giddy.

THEN he saw that the dark figure lay on the ground, motionless. His throat dry, he knelt to feel for heart-beat. There was none.

"Joanna," he said. "It was just a tramp. Drunk. You killed him?"

"He heard us. I had to. In all the world, you're the only man who knows, the only man I can trust completely."

"But he was drunk! He wouldn't have remembered. If he had, nobody would have believed him."

"I can take no chances," she said. "I'm one woman against a whole world now. Forget him. His life was worthless."

What she read on Tim's face made her catch her breath in a little sob. She moved a few steps away into the shadow.

"I'm going now, Tim. But if you want to see me, I'm singing at the Met tonight."

That was all. She was gone. Tim shuddered. The night was not cold, but his blood was thin with age. And there was that horribly silent figure at his feet.

He walked south. There was nothing he could do for the tramp now. Death had struck too suddenly, too incredibly. As it might strike anywhere, anytime—with Joanna as the Dark Angel.

He knew now that she was inhuman as an angel, perhaps as amoral. The ties that had bound her to humanity were slipping. Tim was perhaps the last of those ties. When that was cut—

There would be nothing to hold her back from fulfilling the least of her desires. She would not die for a thousand years or more. Her powers were superhuman. Had she achieved full maturity yet?

If not, the future might hold sheer horror.

Tim felt his sanity slipping. He stopped at the nearest bar and ordered whisky. He kept on drinking.

He saw a world helpless, writing in agony, beneath the rule of a woman who was more than autocrat. Lilit.

Juno. A goddess—and, perhaps, mother of a race of gods and goddesses. For that was her destiny—to be mother to the new race that would crush and eradicate humanity.

He was very drunk by eight o'clock. He went home by taxi, got a flat little automatic out of a bureau drawer, and went to the Met. He bought a ticket at an exorbitant sum from a scalper and went into the foyer, ready.

His brain felt on fire.

He recognized Joanna instantly when she appeared. She was Marguerite, and it seemed black Satanic irony to him that she should represent the spirit of purity, resisting the lures of Faust and his evil genius. He waited.

And then Tim Hathaway was ready. A gaunt, white-haired figure stood up from an orchestra seat and leveled an automatic at Marguerite's white-gowned figure. He was seen instantly. Hands reached for him. Voices rose in excited clamor.

He couldn't miss. He squeezed the trigger. The bullet would go through her heart.

It would go through—Joanna's heart.

Yes—it was easy. The tumult, the radiations from a thousand minds beating furiously through the theatre, had confused her. She had no chance to use her inhuman power. She wasn't fully mature yet, and Tim could have killed her then. But he didn't.

At the last moment, he jerked up the automatic. The bullet tore through painted canvas. With a hoarse, sobbing cry, Tim plunged into the heart of the mob that was thronging around him, and lost himself in that human maelstrom.

He slipped through an exit, unobserved. The mob was yelling so loudly that he didn't hear his name called, again and again, by the white-gowned Marguerite on the stage.

"Tim! Come back! You were right, darling! Tim, come back to me!"

Tim Hathaway put his whiskey glass

(Continued on page 96)

THE INVADERS

McGarrity was smart, tough, determined... just the man to blast the dread alien Raiders when they struck his planet



By
GORDON R. DICKSON

HECTOR MCGARRITY looked at Tica and assumed his sternest expression.

"You realize," Hector said, "if you intend to play the part of my assistant on Lamia, you'll have to take orders like everybody else." From the easy chair in which she was sitting, Tica turned her face up to him. It was a

fine boned, perfectly controlled face that would have been pretty had there been a little more warmth of expression on it.

"Of course," she said.

He considered her dispassionately. Tica Smith, a junior planetary representative at twenty-four and a political enemy of the branch of Central Head-



quarters under which he worked; a frighteningly precocious child dedicated to the abstract virtues in a universe of concrete vices. For the past five days he had made a number of efforts to soften her shell of theories before it should be cruelly shattered by the reality that awaited them both on Lamia. They had been absolutely without success. She considered herself his enemy and had wangled the right to come

with him to the threatened world solely to acquire ammunition for her battle to destroy him and the system of Assigned Defense Commanders of which he was the working unit. She disbelieved or discounted anything he said.

He permitted a small corner of annoyance to touch his mind. It was almost the ultimate in emotion that training and time had left him. This annoyance was followed almost immediately by a wisp of ironic humor. Though she did not know it, he was being gentle with her. It was the first time in fifteen years he had been gentle with anyone.

"I'll see you again when it's time to land," he said, abruptly, and, turning on his heel, opened the door of her stateroom and stepped out into the long central corridor of the liner. He closed it behind him. Turning to the left, he went forward toward the control room.

He strode along the echoing steel corridor, a heavy-shouldered, still-faced giant of a man, moving lithely with the ease of the strict physical conditioning that was required of him. His highly trained body was remote from the cold center of his mind. And it needed to

be. For his decisions meant life or death to the people of the far flung colonies he defended, from time to time, when raiding alien groups broke through the Frontier Guard. It was as if his body housed two brains—one, the director of the bone-and-muscle fighting machine that walked the corridor—the other, the remote thinker that meditated on the present situation.

BRIEFLY, the matter was simple. A spearhead of the Spindle ships had penetrated the defending stations of the Beltane quadrant. These swift, voracious aliens, by far the most common and the trickiest of the unknown races that made attempted raids on the little human space-area, would try a hit-and-run plundering of any one of a number of Colony planets in the vicinity. Hector, among other Assigned Defense Commanders, had been sent out to one of the threatened colonies to take charge of matters there and direct the colonists in case they should be the target of the invaders' attack.

So much for that. It was a job Hector was trained to do, and had done a dozen times in the past fifteen years. What complicated the situation was the presence of Tica. She headed a Government Committee that was probing the Defense Commander setup with the hope of destroying it. Their motives in doing so were almost unselfish and badly mistaken.

Theoretically, their claim that the unlimited powers accorded to a Defense Commander on assignment were a danger to Colony freedom, was sound. In practice, it had been proved that Colonies were almost never capable of supplying the proper sort of trained leadership in such a crisis. Still, people sitting at far away government desks and luncheon tables would argue the fact. Therefore Tica's presence. Therefore, loomed a very real danger that she would disagree with some of Hector's actions on Lamia and, by re-

vealing her own position, create a dangerous division of authority.

Colonists at odds with Hector might appeal to Tica, as visiting junior representative, to override his decisions. She would have no legal right to do so, but—Hector's face went a little grim—it might come to killing. Again, theoretically he would be within his rights, but he had no illusions as to what would happen in practice to the Assigned Defense Commander who shot down a visiting elected representative of a populated planet.

HE HAD reached the control room door. Now he shut the problem from his mind, and pushed it open, stepping inside. A young second officer sat at the navigator's board. Hector went directly to him, ignoring the captain who stood across the room, and looked over the gold-braided shoulder.

"How soon before we land?" Hector asked.

From across the room, the captain turned an angry face toward Hector. The *Mariana* was a passenger liner. She had been hauled off her regular route under peremptory government orders to deliver Hector and Tica Smith to Lamia. The passengers aboard were nervous and the captain had been bearing the brunt of their complaints. To be ignored in his own control room was a further annoyance.

"It's customary to knock, Mr. McGarrity," he said, "when a passenger comes into the control room." Hector ignored him.

"How long?" he repeated to the second officer.

The young officer flushed, but did not turn his head or reply. He was feeling a natural sympathy for his captain, whose rebuke to Hector had emboldened him. He picked up a hand calculator.

Inside himself, Hector sighed softly. He put one large hand on the back of the chair and spun it around so that

the boy faced him. While the white face stared, he drew the gun that he wore quite openly in the holster at his side.

"Sonny," he said, quietly, hefting the heavy weapon casually in his hand, "do you realize that I could smash your face in with the butt of this and be strictly within my rights?"

The blood drained from the young officer's face and neck. For a moment his nerve held, then it broke.

"About an hour," he said. Hector nodded and turned away. As he walked out through the door, the second's eyes went in hurt amazement to the captain. The captain avoided his gaze, turning his head away.

It was always the same, thought Hector, wearily, walking in the direction of the passenger lounge. There was always the position to uphold. He remembered the motto of the training halls, during his five grueling years of preparation for the job. "To be wrong is to be dead." It was literally true during the last stages of the training. When you take over an unfamiliar people in a situation that requires unthinking obedience on a few days notice, there must be no doubt in their minds that you are all-powerful, that you can do no wrong. Now he had a further chore to do. The second's defiance and the captain's hostility were an index of their attitudes of the passengers. If their resentment should be in any way communicated to the colonists during the brief landing, there would be trouble. He turned into the lounge.

There was a good handful of people there, some at the bar, most seated at tables, drinking. Frightened and angry glances rested on him as he came in, and a low mutter of talk broke out.

Hector ignored them. Paying no attention to the bartender he went behind the bar and picked up a bottle at random. Without offering to pay, he took a glass and carried both to an empty table. He sat down, poured the glass full and drank.

He sat there, with grim amusement, while the tension grew. The muttered voices rose and fragments of wrathful speech came clearly to his ears. Finally one man jumped to his feet and strode over to Hector's table. He put both hands on the edge and leaned forward.

"Listen!" he said tightly. "We've been talking it over. It's not fair to the passengers of this ship to run the risk of landing on Lamia. There's no reason you and Representative Smith can't take a lifeboat down."

Hector refilled his glass.

"Damn it!" shouted the man who was tall and slim, with a touch of the first gray hair of middle age, and an air of authority about him. "Listen to me when I talk to you." And he reached out to grab the arm that was raising Hector's glass to his lips.

LIKE A flash Hector's other hand moved in a swift blur of motion, and there was an odd, crunching sound as it closed over the grabbing hand. Then he let go, and the man stood staring in shocked disbelief at fingers that stood at odd angles to his palm with the white bone showing through.

"You broke it," he said stupidly.

Hector drank.

"You broke it!" repeated the man. It was almost a wail. With a sudden choked sound, he turned and ran out through the door of the lounge, holding his injured hand in the other one.

For a long second, the stillness of death held the lounge; then swiftly passengers began to leave. Hector's job was done. There was no resentment now among the passengers to communicate to the colonists. Only fear.

A little bitterly, Hector drank.

Forty minutes later, the alarm bell sounded. Hector braced himself in the chair for the slight shock of the landing, then rose to his feet. He made his way to the open port and found Tica Smith there, waiting. Beneath her

dark hair, her face was as calm as ever, but her brown eyes were chill.

"You might be interested to know," she said. "I heard about what you just did." He nodded briefly, abstractedly, dismissing the matter.

"Follow me down," he told her, "and don't say anything unless one of the welcoming committee speaks to you."

"Very well," she said coldly, picking up her luggage case, and followed him down the steps to the landing field, and the people who waited there.

There were five of them: a thin, ineffectual looking man in his sixties; a thickset man of middle age and better than average height; a strange-looking individual in rough clothes with a knife at his side and long brown hair and beard framing a narrow nose and keen brown eyes; and a nondescript young man with a portable pickup transmitter slung from his shoulders.

It was to him that Hector walked immediately, ignoring the others. He had been talking down into the pickup in easy conversational tones. Now, seeing Hector, he hurried what he had to say.

"—and here he is now, folks. Commander Hector McGarrity, whom you—"

Hector pushed him away from the portable set, cutting off the flow of words. He stood squarely in front of the pickup, knowing that throughout the city behind him, his words and appearance would be filling the screens of any set now working.

"Listen to me," he said briefly. "I want your attention. This planet is now under martial law. You will all go home, unless your job is essential to city operation. Inside the next two hours, I will come on the air again to give you detailed directions as to what you must do. Until then, stay off the streets and make sure you can easily be located. That's all."

He turned away from the pickup and started away across the field. Tica and the rest followed him, all except the

young man with the pickup, who stood where he was, following them out of sight with the scanning unit of the pickup.

"Where's the car?" said Hetcor, abruptly. The thickset man pointed toward a ground vehicle parked some distance off to their right. Hector changed direction.

"Let me introduce myself," panted the thickset man, hurrying to keep pace with Hector's long strides, "I'm Governor Gideon Stern. This is Mayor Hemple—"

"Save it!" said Hector, curtly. "When we get to the governor's house, we can talk. Right now, I want a look at the city."

He strode on.

AT TOP speed, they drove through Lamia City. Hector rode in front with the governor, who was driving, and kept up a steady barrage of questions. What was their water supply? Did they have a militia? Sewage disposal? Which of the buildings had reinforced walls?

"But surely," protested Gideon Stern, his ruddy face paling, "you won't let it come to street fighting?"

"Maybe," said Hector laconically; and took up his questions, again.

The car was crowded. In the back seat, wedged in between the brown-bearded man and the thin city mayor, Tica held her luggage case on her knees and strove to maintain her customary coolness. The two who shared the seat with her showed no inclination to talk to each other, which puzzled her. The bearded man was quietly abstract, the mayor clearly in a state bordering on nervous collapse. She could feel the slight trembling in the bony arm that pressed against her side. He aroused her sympathy, even as the other's unconcern irritated her. Before she could stop to remember what Hector had told her, she spoke to him.

"I imagine you're terribly worried," she began, "facing the threat of an in-

vasion so suddenly this way." He turned a grateful glance toward her and the words came spilling out.

"You don't know the half of it!" he began. "We've been waiting—"

"Quiet back there!"

It was Hector's voice, coolly authoritative from the front seat, and it sliced off the mayor's flow of words abruptly. He stiffened and sat in silence. Tica bit her lip angrily.

The back seat rode in silence until they reached the governor's house.

They went immediately to the office, where they took chairs in a rough circle, all except Hector who stood facing them, and the bearded man who seemed to prefer to remain standing.

"All right," said Hector, crisply. "Now the introductions." He pointed in turn to the Governor and the Mayor. "You're Stern, and he's Hemple. You?" He stabbed a finger at the brown-bearded man.

"J. J.," came the prompt answer.

"He's one of the bushrunners," interrupted Stern, hastily. "Sort of a representative of the hunters and trappers. He—they—sent him in to see if there was anything they could do to help."

"All right," Hector nodded. He turned to Tica. "Tica Smith, my assistant," he said briefly.

"Just a minute!" Tica had been boiling inside ever since Hector had summarily cut short her conversation in the car. "When I agreed to be known as your assistant, I didn't intend the truth to be kept from the local authorities." She sent a challenging stare at Hector.

"Very well," he answered evenly. She could not tell from his face whether he was angry or not. "This is Miss Tica Smith, Junior Representative from the planet Arco, who has come along as a government observer."

"How do you do," said Stern brightly. "I'm glad the government has seen fit to send Miss Smith along."

"Yes, yes, indeed!" echoed Hemple. The bushrunner said nothing, and

Tica, looking at him, was prodded into further action.

"And one more thing," she said. "Since this is a government matter, I think we should dispense with pet names or abbreviations." She turned squarely toward the bushrunner. "What's your full name?"

"J. J.," he answered, bending his bright eyes on her.

HER temper snapped. "Don't be ridiculous," she said. "You must have a full name." The hint of a thin smile touched the man's lips, half-hidden beneath the beard.

"I guess," he said, coolly. "you never learned your manners, Miss." The words took her breath away.

"Why—" she began furiously, when she could speak again. But Hector interrupted.

"That's enough," he said, crisply. "For the information of all of you, Miss Smith is an observer only. She has nothing to do with the action I take; and no authority." Tica choked back her rage. He was speaking no more than the truth. "Now, we'll get down to business. I understand your one piece of heavy armament is a late-model K-four rock-anchored space rifle, ten miles from the city. You also have some two thousand portables and hand-guns arsenaled in the K-four's dome. Is that right?"

"Yes," bleated Hemple. "But—"

"That's right, that's right," interrupted Stern, quickly.

"You have gun assistants for the K-four who have been trained in its use?"

"Yes," said Stern.

"But no militia?"

"Well, no," answered the perspiring governor, "but the bushrunners—"

"Are the bushrunners," interrupted J. J., suddenly with a snap. "Just so you get things straight, Commander, the boys aren't worried about themselves. We could fade off into the bush and those raiders'd never find us. We'll

still help, but we aren't doing all the work for these fat citizens. So you and these two figure things out and tell us what you want. If we like it, we'll do it. If we don't, you can whistle for all the help you'll get." Hector looked at him.

"We'll see," he said noncommittally. He turned back to the two officials.

"Can you think of anything we haven't discussed that concerns the defensive effort the city might put up?"

"No," said Stern, and the mayor nodded by way of agreement.

"All right," said Hector. "Then hook me up with the local station, and I'll make my broadcast."

What he said was brief and to the point:

"All able-bodied men over sixteen and the single able-bodied women over the same age will remain in the city, in their own homes as much as possible, and await further orders. All others will prepare for evacuation, taking warm clothing, bedding, and food for two weeks. Nothing else. I repeat, nothing else. This city is under martial law and any attempt to smuggle valuables out will be regarded as looting and punished as such. As soon as each evacuee is ready, he or she is to notify the mayor's office. By tomorrow morning at the latest you will be moved out back into the bush. All sales of liquor are hereby discontinued, and all other business establishments are closed except for the sale of food and clothing. Stay in your homes; stay close to your receivers; and wait further orders."

HE CLICKED off the pickup into which he had been talking; and turned back to the four occupants of the room.

"Miss Smith and I will stay here," he said to Stern. "You'll arrange to have rooms fixed for us."

"Of course," said the Governor.

"Very well," said Hector. He moved over to the desk and picked up a sty-

lus in one large hand, and drew a sheet of paper toward him. "You, J. J., can arrange for guides to take the evacuees back into the bush?" The bushrunner nodded.

"We'll do that," he said.

"And you, Stern," the stylus in Hector's hand raced over the paper, "this is an official order authorizing you to withdraw the portables and handguns from the K-four housing and distribute them to the able-bodied men and women in the city. Take ten men out to the space rifle and—"

"I knew it! I knew it!" The anguished tones of the mayor brought all eyes toward him. He ignored them, concentrating on Stern. "I told you, Gideon. I told you he'd want those before we could get that beast out of the gunhousing—"

"Shut up, you fool!" answered the governor, roughly. "I never expected to use them, anyway." He turned calmly enough to meet Hector's demanding stare. "The truth of it is, Commander, that you aren't going to be able to defend Lamia with the weapons and people here. One of our local species of animal that has the uncomfortable power of—er—shocking people, has taken up its residence in the housing and can't be gotten out. And no one can get in while it's there." Hector felt a little white flame of anger flare coldly in the back of his mind.

"You deliberately let me broadcast without knowing this?" he said.

"Frankly, yes," said Stern. His face was smooth now. "You see, I've heard about Miss Smith's committee. I've even listened in on some of the broadcast meetings over the ultrawave. And I agree with her. There's no reason why untrained men and women should have to risk their lives and possessions when we have a Space Fleet to do the job for them. Now, in this case, all the weapons are in the space rifle housing and the housing can't be entered. The only thing you can do, Commander, is to broadcast for a Fleet defense unit

to be stationed here at the planet until the emergency is past." He smiled, a little smugly.

Hector smiled a wintry smile in his direction.

"How much do you know about Fleet movements, Stern?" he asked. The governor shrugged.

"Nothing, naturally," he answered. "I've got nothing to do with military matters."

"Then I'll tell you something," said Hector. "All available Fleet units are waiting at base right now for the first news of a planetary raid. When they hear, they'll move to gather in the raiders and force them back beyond the Frontier. Until then, they'll stay where they are."

"But you can call them!" cried the governor.

"Only in an emergency," said Hector.

"But my God!" said Stern. "If this isn't an emergency, what is?"

"It's an emergency for Lamia," said Hector, "and Lamia is only of secondary importance." He got up from the desk and strode around it to stand facing Stern. The smaller man drew back. "You fat little idiot!" he said "You and your handful of people are in the front line. Back on the Inner Worlds, there are six quadrillions of men and women and children with no protection at all. If the Raiders aren't trapped out here and killed off or forced back, they have no fleet nor weapons. Should I weaken the line that hopes to hold them? No! If we can't get at the weapons, that's our tough luck. And if you're responsible for the creature being there, then you've cut all our throats and I'll take pleasure in seeing you before a firing squad. This is no game, Stern!"

A STUNNED silence in the big office followed his words. Stern was shaken, Hemple on the point of collapse. Tica stared at Hector, white-faced, overwhelmed by the

change from the taciturn, quiet man she had faced with confidence on the liner trip in to the planet. Only J. J. whistled softly to himself and rubbed the butt of his knife with one brown thumb.

"You know, Commander," he said. "I like the way you talk. I don't guess me and the boys will have any disagreement with anything you want to do." Hector glanced at him, and half-smiled.

"Thanks," he said.

"Nothing," said J. J. He shrugged his shoulders, turning swiftly on the paralyzed governor. "What's in there, Stern? A land-squid? A digger?" The governor shook his head, dizzily, as if coming out of a trance.

"A smuglet," he said, "I—we saw smuglet tracks leading up to the ventilator. The bars were chewed off." Hector looked at J. J.

"That sounds right," the bushrunner answered his unspoken question. "A smuglet can chew through thin steel if you give him time and you know those ventilator gratings. None of the other shockers could."

"Shockers?" demanded Hector.

"You'll see," answered J. J. "A bunch of the native animals here have some way of tickling up your nerves when you get too close. A smuglet can knock you over at fifteen yards. We better get out there and take a look-see."

THEY rode out in two cars. J. J., the Governor, and the mayor in the first, and Hector with Tica following in the second. It was the first time they had been alone together since leaving the ship and he could feel her sitting stiffly beside him as he handled the controls, betraying fear and anger. Finally she spoke.

"You could have called for help" she said. He shook his head.

"No," he replied briefly. She persisted.

"If you *had* called," she said, "they would have come, wouldn't they?" He

looked at her out of the corner of his eyes.

"No," he repeated. Her temper flared.

"I think you're a glory-hunter!" she snapped. He shrugged, keeping his eyes on the road. They were out of the clean wide streets of the city now and the track they followed was rutted and hemmed with brush. Odd purple trees arched over their heads at long intervals.

"What you don't realize," he said, suddenly, impelled by the same obscure urge to justify himself that had led him to talk to her on the liner, "is the size of the human living area. As I said back in the office, there's some six quadrillion of us, settled in a number of planetary systems in an area of space roughly sixty thousand light years in diameter. One planet, one colony, a few thousand inhabitants are like one bug on the surface of the pond when the fish come in to feed. The flash of one dark shape, a ripple, and it's gone. Expendable. But if the fish can be turned back, by any sacrifice, that is the important thing.

"You sit in your Committee Room back on Earth and speak of the brave colonists, the women, the children. And you allow yourself the luxury of pity for them, thinking them somehow different, because of their position, than you. I tell you there is no difference. The human race has grown big enough to attract the attention of other space-going races and you, as well as these, the colonists, may live to see your birthplace flame into nothingness and the ancient mountains of Earth flowing in lava to the sea. We are a long way, maybe a million years yet, from peace and security; and maybe we'll never have it."

She looked at him oddly, reluctant to believe that he should think so deeply. His words were too much at odds with her preconceived ideas of him and the service to which he belonged. Finally she took refuge in mockery.

"My, you're a pessimist," she said with superficial banality.

He shrugged in angry disgust and drove on in silence.

The space rifle was a great dome shielding a thick muzzle—like the head of some gigantic cobra rising from the brush and purple trees. For a space of forty meters around it, the ground had been cleared. The two cars pulled up and parked.

They got out.

Two men—by their uniforms, members of the local police—were standing by the dome. They turned and hurried up to Stern as the group approached.

"Still in there, sir," said the taller one, saluting. "Jerry tried to crawl up to the door, but the smuglet must have felt him coming, and knocked him out just as he got there. We dragged him off and sent him back to headquarters."

"Oh, yes," said Stern worriedly. "This is Commander McGarrity, boys. You'll take your orders from him."

"Yes, sir," said the one he spoke to. Hector reached out and caught his shoulder with one big hand, turning him toward the dome.

"Where's the ventilator?" he asked.

"Halfway around the dome," the policeman said, pointing. Hector, following the line of his finger, saw a square opening some five feet off the ground with some ragged ends of grating twisting out. He moved in that direction, followed by J. J.

WHEN he got close, he could see that part of the grating had been bent and broken as well as chewed. He pointed it out to the bushrunner.

"Pretty strong," he said.

"Hefty," admitted J. J. "They weigh between ninety and a hundred and fifty pounds, grown. Feed off the bush, though; and don't do any harm, except with that shocking trick of theirs."

"What is it?" asked Hector. "Like

the charge from an electric eel back on Earth?" J. J. shrugged.

"Don't know," he answered. "I don't think anyone does. Not much like the eel, though. More like the skunk. You don't have to do anything but get close, and it's strictly defensive. Walk up close and you'll get a tingle."

Hector turned and approached the building. He was barely three meters from it when a strange twitchiness seemed to run all over the surface of his skin. He stopped.

"Feel it?" said the bushrunner. "Now take one more step." Hector took his customary long stride forward and immediately the twitching jumped to unbearable proportions. His teeth chattered and his scalp seemed to crawl and his head began to swim dizzily. He took a hurried step backward, and the twitching dropped. He went two more steps to the rear, and it was gone.

"Does it keep that up all the time?" he said, rejoining J. J.

"Until it's dead," answered the bushrunner. Hector stood a minute, thinking. Then he turned and strode back to Stern.

"I take it the door to the housing's locked?" he said.

"Yes," answered the governor, unhappily. "I don't suppose there's any way you could fire through it, and—"

"Not through *that* shielding," said Hector, waving his hand at the dome. "Also, it would wreck the rifle controls inside."

"Maybe if we rushed it," suggested Stern. J. J., shook his head.

"Take you too long to unlock the door," he said.

"Do you have any exterminators in the city, with gas equipment?" said Hector. Stern's face lit up.

"Of course," he answered.

"Get them out here," said Hector. "And bring the fire department, too." Stern nodded and hurried off to the two-way communicator in his ear.

The fire department was the first

to arrive. Hector had them well-tap with power equipment to the first water level and hook the pump up. Then he directed two volunteers to run the nozzle of the hose as close to the dome as possible and direct a steady stream of water into the torn ventilator. The pump whirled, the two volunteers braced themselves, and a jet of silver water hammered into the opening.

The opening drank it up.

After half an hour, Hector called a halt. He walked close enough to the dome to satisfy himself that the smuggler was still alive and broadcasting. Then turned and came back.

"I can understand," he said to J. J., "that the animal might be undrownable. But where's the water going to?"

There was a diffident noise at the side and one of the policemen spoke up.

"Excuse me, Commander—" he said. Hector turned.

"Excuse me," the man went on. "But I've been inside the housing before, and there's a drain in there—"

"Drain!" echoed Hector, exasperatedly. He whirled on one heel and shouted. "Stern!"

The governor came running up. Hector's voice was hard.

"You don't happen deliberately to be sabotaging the defense of this colony, do you?" he said, grimly. "Why didn't you tell me there was a drain in there?" The governor's jaw fell in surprise.

"A drain!" he said. "Why that's right, there is a drain in there. I'd forgotten all about it." Hector's lips thinned, and he turned away.

"All right!" he called to the fire department crew. "Get that out of there. Where's that exterminator outfit?"

FOOTSTEPS sounded at Hector's elbow. "Right here, Commander." It was a lank old

man with a leathery face. "We just arrived."

"Good," said Hector. "Have they told you about what we're trying to do here?"

"Yep," answered the oldster.

"Think you can get close enough to pump gas into that ventilator?"

"Why, sure," said the exterminator. "Jerry here'll just walk right up to that hole and put the tube in," he indicated a large, lumpish youth not much smaller than Hector. "Jerry's m'boy. Strong as a truck." Jerry grinned and picked up a bulky section of the gas generator to show how strong he was.

"Hmm," said Hector. "Well, tie a rope around him, just to make sure."

"I don't need no rope," protested Jerry. Hector looked at him. "Yes, sir, Commander," he mumbled.

A rope was tied around Jerry's ample waist, the gas generator hooked up and Jerry picked up one end of the tube.

"Do you think it'll work?" said Tica, looking up at Hector as the boy started for the ventilator. Hector shook his head.

"There's that open drain," he said, "and no one can stay up there long enough to plug the ventilator. But we may get enough—" he was watching the boy Jerry approach the ventilator. He had just slowed as if he had run into a waist-high river of invisible molasses. He was not giving up easily, however, for he continued to shuffle on, head down. He slogged his way to the opening, leaned for a moment against the dome, and slid down the smooth metal in an ungraceful faint.

"Haul him back," ordered Hector.

They pulled the large, unconscious body in hand over hand. Hector was already taking off his jacket. Tica looked at Hector with a new emotion.

"You aren't going in there?" she said, incredulously.

"Do you see anybody else offering

to go?" He inquired sourly. J. J. drifted over with a word of advice.

"Don't try to run in, Commander," he drawled. "It hits you like an ax in the neck when you come into close range sudden." Hector nodded; and, taking the rope that had been disengaged from Jerry, tied it around his own broad chest, under the shoulders. He picked up the tube that Jerry had dropped, and started to walk in, letting it slide through his fingers as he approached the fallen end of the dome.

"Just hope his heart's in good shape," said J. J., with a malicious glance at Tica.

"His heart!" she echoed, spinning on him.

"Kills fellers like him, sometimes," said J. J., snapping his fingers. She turned away, controlling herself. Of course Hector's heart would be—would have to be, for the job he did—in perfect shape. Her breath came a little faster as she watched.

Hector had started for the dome with slow easy strides. When the first warning tingle touched him, he stopped and forced himself to breathe deeply. Then he stepped forward.

It was like stepping down a steep shelving beach into very cold water. With the first step the twitching tore at him, seeming to choke off his breathing. With the next, it became unbearable. His skin crawled, his throat contracted, and the dome began to spin dizzily before his eyes. A feeling of utter panic began to rise within him. He lurched forward toward the haze of the dome and the bobbing black splotch that was the ventilator hole. He was no longer conscious of the ground beneath his feet or the rope around his chest. Only a dim recognition of the tube he held in his hands stayed with him.

He took one more step and felt the wall of the dome hit him, and the end of the tube pull up from the ground and almost slip through his fingers. Every nerve in his body was

screaming, leaping in protest against the outrage of the feeling that tore at him. He set his teeth in his lower lip, feeling for a second the small, sharp pain distract him from the unknown thing tearing at him. He lifted the tube, fumbled it into the opening. His arms felt like lead, but he pushed once, fighting back the black waves of unconsciousness that rose nauseatingly within him. He pushed again, and the tube slid farther into the hole. And then the black waves rose at last, fighting down the end of his resistance, and buried him deep.

SEVERAL hours later Hector awoke to a dark room and the eerie shadows cast by a strange moon hurtling close and swift along the horizon. Fighting back the dragging weakness that lay like a heavy blanket on his limbs, he struggled to a sitting position.

"Hey!" he called hoarsely.

A door opened suddenly, and a shaft of brilliant light cut across him, dazzling him. He blinked in the sudden glare, hearing the light taps of a woman's heels approaching him. He recognized Tica.

"You mustn't get up," she said. He growled something unintelligible even to himself. Grasping her arm, he hauled himself upright with as little ceremony as if she had been a post. She staggered under his weight, but stood. When he had regained his feet, she put one slim arm around his waist by way of support.

She helped him into the next room. It was the office of the governor's house, back in the city and Stern. Hemple and J. J. were standing in it, looking at him curiously. He paid them no attention, but staggered across the room to the desk and sunk in a chair that was pulled up to it. The smooth plastic was cool against his legs. He glanced down.

"Get me some clothes!" he croaked. J. J. chuckled. Tica turned and went

back into the bedroom. Hector's gaze swept the room and settled on Stern.

"Did I get the tube in?" he demanded.

"Oh, yes," said the Governor, nervously. "Yes, it's in. The gas is going."

"Any luck yet?"

"No." Hector let his eyes shift to the two other men.

"What are you all doing back here?" he asked. Tica came back in with his tunic and breeches. He pushed himself up from the chair and reached for them, but from sheer weakness was not able to avoid the help she offered him in putting them on.

"Well—" said Hemple. J. J. laughed.

"You don't know it, Commander," he said, "but you got a rebellion on your hands."

"What?" growled Hector.

"These two fat sheep," said J. J., jerking his thumb at Stern and Hemple, "heard a rumor on the ultra-wave that the raiders had been spotted less than twenty-four hours from here. Instead of keeping the news to themselves, they let it out and the whole town has gone wild. The citizens know, now, that the smuglet is keeping them from the weapons. Half are heading for the hills; and the other half are trying to contact the raiders on the ultra-wave and surrender."

"Surrender!" Hector turned on Stern and Hemple, steadying himself with one hand on a corner of the desk. "You damn fools! You don't surrender to the Spindle Ships, any more than you surrender to a tiger. Both simply take it as an invitation to eat you up."

"Not me—not me!" bleated Hemple. "I didn't want to surrender. But Gideon—" Stern made a little despairing jerk with his hand and the thin man's voice stopped.

"Yes," Stern said, in a low voice, "I said they should try it." The strength seemed to have gone out of him, yet at the same time a certain frankness and honesty had returned to

replace it. "As you say, Commander, I'm a fool. I knew it, but I didn't want to admit it. Now I've just made a mess of things." He sat down on a chair, burying his face in his hands. "I was a fool to buy the governorship in the first place."

"Buy the governorship!" It was Tica's voice, high and shocked. J. J. chuckled maliciously in the corner; but Hector nodded.

"That explains a lot of things," he said; and his voice was somewhat kinder. He turned to Tica. "It's not unusual in some outer colonies where the governorship is more of a paper title than anything else, for men to buy up a few votes to make themselves feel good and perhaps add a little prestige to whatever business they happen to be in. Why didn't you tell me?" he went on to Stern. "It would have saved us both a lot of trouble."

THE GIRL stared at him, astonished. "But he is the governor, isn't he?" asked Tica.

"He might as well be the dogcatcher for all the good he can do me," said Hector grimly. "His election was a farce; and in the eyes of the colonists, he's a farce. And Hemple?"

"My cousin," said Stern, ashamedly. He went on lamely, "We figured Lamia was growing. I would be the first governor. He would be the first mayor—"

"Forget it now," said Hector. "You can both go home—no, wait; I may have some use for you after all. J. J. said they're trying to make contact with the raiders. That means a group of them are at the ultra-wave station. Is there any way I could get there without attracting attention?"

"There's a power-tunnel there from this building," answered Stern. "But you'd never make it. They'll—"

"We'll make it," interrupted J. J. He stepped over to the window and pressed the button that rolled the wide transparent sheet back into its casing.

He whistled twice into the darkness.

There was a stir outside. A leg came over the sill, followed by an arm and a big, baldheaded man climbed into the room, followed by a boy in his teens who grinned embarrassedly at Tica and turned a bright red under her gaze.

"This is Bonny," said J. J., slapping the boy on the shoulder, "and the other one's Crocus. They can go ahead to take care of any guards at the other end of the tunnel."

"But he's just a child," said Tica, fascinatedly. Bonny turned his head away. J. J.'s, thin lips twisted a trifle sourly.

"As I said when I first saw you," he answered, "you evidently never learned manners. Bonny's more of a man than most you'll ever meet." He turned to Hector. "Let's go."

Stern and Hemple led them downstairs to the mouth of the power tunnel connecting with the station, but, at Hector's order, stayed there. The others got into the two little plastic shells that floated there between the upper and lower rails of the tunnel, Bonny and Crocus in the first one—and the frail craft pillowed on its magnetic fields, rocked dangerously as the bald-headed man climbed aboard—and J. J., Hector and Tica in the second.

"Shove off," said J. J. In the car ahead, Bonny lifted the magnetic grapple that anchored his craft to a standstill and it rocketed off into the dimness of the tunnel. "One—two—three—four—five—" counted J. J., and lifted his own grapple. The three of them were slammed back into the seat as the shell leaped forward.

It was like dropping down an endless well. Their speed between the close walls that they almost, but never quite touched, was so terrific that it made Tica dizzy and she clutched automatically at Hector, closing her eyes. He felt the small, tense pressure of her hands and turned his head to

look down at her dark hair, whipping free in the air that got past the visor of the shell. And he looked away again, feeling an unaccustomed uneasiness stir within him, but holding the arm she held very still.

It was a trip measured in seconds. Nevertheless when they got to their destination, the life-and-death struggle that preceded them was already over. Three men in the uniform of the city police were dead or dying, and Bonny was straightening up from another still figure in civilian clothes, the knife in his hand running red. Again his eyes met Tica's and again he blushed. A sudden surge of pity and horror shook her so that she, this time, turned her head away.

"Upstairs!" snapped J. J. He slid back the doors of the levitator and held them while the rest stepped into the rising pressure of the beams and were borne upward past fleeting white doors to the top of the shaft. Here, J. J. pulled back the final door and they tumbled out into the broadcast room at the top of the station.

"Hold it!" snapped the bearded bush-runner. The men around the controls, froze, seeing the guns in the hands of the three men. Hector, who had not bothered to draw his own weapon, strode over to the control board and brushed the man there roughly out of the way.

"Made contact?" he demanded, harshly.

"N-no," stuttered the technician, his fear naked in his eyes.

"Good!" growled Hector. He turned away. Walking over to the transparent dome that covered the broadcast room, he looked out.

A SEA of faces were upturned toward him. He marked the limits of the crowd and estimated that most of the people in the city must be grouped around below, waiting. He turned away and went

back to the pickup in the middle of the room.

"Switch me onto the outside screen," he said. The man he had shoved from the controls turned slowly back to them and made some adjustments. "Am I on?"

"You're on," said J. J., from his position next to the dome. "I can just see the top of the screen from here."

From the crowd outside came a distant, muted, swelling roar to echo and verify his words. Facing the pickup, Hector held up his hand for silence; and, as the roar faded, those in the broadcast room heard the thunder of his voice from the annunciators outside the building.

"Listen to me!" he said. "You know me. All of you know me. I have spoken to you twice so far. You know what my job is here. It is to defend you from the attack of the alien. But it is more. It is also to take command of this colony and this planet and not to relinquish command until my job is done. I have, therefore, just put a halt to your attempt to surrender to the Spindle Ships.

"I will tell you why. This alien race which has just broken through the Frontier Guard and threatens you now, does not understand the concept of surrender. They have never surrendered themselves and they cannot conceive what humans mean when they attempt to surrender to them. Your surrender to them would have meant only an invitation to butchery and looting.

"Furthermore, there is no need to surrender. By the time they reach Lamia, the housing of the K-four will be open and we will be armed to repulse them. You may have heard that all attempts to remove the smuglet have been failures. This is not true. I promise you that I will open the K-four housing before noon tomorrow. As guarantee that this will happen, I furthermore give you my word that if the housing is not open. I will then

make no further opposition to your attempts to call the alien and surrender. Until then, however, this building will be evacuated and remain sealed.

"That is all."

He stepped back from the pickup and signaled the man at the control board to cut the screen.

"It's off," said J. J., from the dome. He added, after a moment's pause, "And they're leaving."

"All right," said Hector. "Everybody downstairs. I'm going to seal this, and then I'll be right with you."

They turned and went, herding the men who had been attempting contact before them, crowded back into the levitator and dropped to the lofty entrance hall on the ground floor. In a few minutes, Hector rejoined them.

"We'll go out the front way," he said. "I want to seal that, too." He turned to the men who had been working in the broadcast room. "You understand that none of you are to come back here?"

They muttered a sullen assent.

"Good," said Hector, and they went through the high front doors into the cool night, the stationmen fading away in the darkness, the others watching curiously as, with his handgun, Hector melted the edges of the two metal doors together.

"Now," he said, turning away. "Back to the governor's house."

STERN was still waiting for them when they returned, but Hemple had gone back to his home and wife, perhaps feeling the need for the presence of familiar things now that his world was crumbling. Stern, the somewhat stronger man of the two, and a bachelor, was sticking it out, but his face was wan as he greeted them.

"Stern," said Horace, without preliminaries, "You'd better show Miss Smith her room, and turn in yourself. It doesn't look like we can do any-

thing until morning." Tica looked up at the hard lines of his face.

"How about you?" she asked.

"I'm going to talk some things over with J. J." His features were drawn and tired as he answered.

"I'm not tired," she said. "I'll stay up, too."

"You'll go to bed!" his voice was harsh.

"But if there's talking to be done, I want to hear it," she cried. "Remember, I'm here as an observer."

"And let me remind you," his voice boomed angrily in the echoing hallway of the governor's house, "that I am in command and you are strictly under my orders. Go to bed!" And, turning on his heel, he strode off into the office. J. J. turned and followed him. The door slammed, leaving her sick and angry.

"Miss Smith!" It was Stern's voice at her elbow, soft, almost humble. She turned toward him. "This way, Miss Smith."

As in a dream she followed him down the hall and off a branching corridor to a wide dim room, lit by the swiftly moving moon.

"The light—"

"Never mind the lights," she said, numbly. "I can see well enough, and I think I'll go right to sleep." He nodded, and went out.

"Good night, Miss Smith." The door closed behind him.

"Good night," she murmured automatically to the closed door. She walked across the shadowed room and sank tiredly onto the softness of the wide bed. It would be dawn in a few short hours. She leaned forward, pressing her slim fingers against her temples as if to drive back the memories of the day. The mob, Hector collapsing against the dome, the boy Bonny with his dripping knife. She lay back, head against the yielding pillow, taking her hands from her face. She was conscious of a deep dragging exhaustion and a longing to be gone,

away from the harsh incomprehensible standards of this unfamiliar world. She felt as if the whole fabric of her logic had been ripped away; as if she had been staked out naked to the universe, mute and helpless. She groped for something to cling to and realized suddenly that it was Hector, and Hector alone who bridged the gap between the present situation and all the other situations she had ever known.

She tossed on the bed.

SHE had come out here as an observer—supposedly. Actually, she admitted to herself, she had been nothing more than a prejudiced gatherer of facts favorable to her own cause. It had been her belief that the Colonists were abused by the Assigned Defense Commanders, that the military organization robbed them of personal freedoms. She laughed, a little bitterly. Freedom? Freedom to buy offices? Freedom to cut throats? Those were their freedoms. Starkly, to herself, in the darkness she faced the fact that she had not known what she was talking about. She realized now that the committee she headed were a pack of fools who read statistics from sheets of paper and thought themselves qualified to make decisions. She would resign. She would report that, after looking over the situation, she felt herself unqualified to judge the matter. And she would tell Hector of this decision right away.

The notion was so attractive that she rose to her feet. Almost happily, she walked across the room and out the door into the hall. Here she paused. She had paid little attention to which way she had come to her bedroom in this big house and now she was uncertain of the way back to the office. She hesitated. Then it occurred to her that Stern's room must be close.

"Mr. Stern," she called softly. When there was no answer, she tried again, more loudly, "Mr. Stern!"

Still there was no answer. Asleep, she thought. She moved to the nearest door on the hallway and knocked. There was no answer and she opened it up. It was in perfect order and empty. She stepped back, shut the door and tried the next one.

It was behind the fourth door that she found Stern's bedroom. It was unmistakably his, for among the disorder of the bed and closet she saw the discarded clothes he had been wearing that day. Other clothing from racks and drawers had been yanked out and strewn around. A half-packed luggage case sat open on the bed and a window curtain fluttered in the breeze from the garden beyond. Stern was gone.

Tica went cold.

She had no idea of the time that she had been lying on her bed; but it could not have been more than half an hour. And in that short time Stern had either left or been making hurried preparations to do so—preparations which had been suddenly interrupted. Her overstrained nerves leaped suddenly under a spasmodic thrust of fear. What the condition of the governor's room could mean, she did not know, but on this wild, panic-ridden planet she could not do otherwise than expect the worst. The fat governor had deserted. Hector must be told.

FILLED with this idea, Tica turned back into the corridor and ran blindly along it, hunting instinctively for the office where she had left the other two men. She blundered by open doors and around corners until eventually she stumbled on the big entrance hallway again and recognized the double doors of the office in its right hand wall. She pressed the button and they flew apart as she thrust into the room.

"Commander!" she cried.

Tica brought herself to a sudden halt. The office, too, was empty.

The calm light of the ceiling shed its even glow on the deep chairs, the desk, with its litter of papers, and the wide open window. She froze, feeling the beat of her heart step up to the frantic rhythm of a fear-crazed animal. The heartbeats shook her, standing there in silence and alone.

Then, there was the faint murmur of voices from outside. She moved swiftly to the window, telling herself that she was foolish. It was possible that they were only in the garden. Still, some instinct of caution caused her to stand to one side of the airy gap, looking out obliquely, but hiding herself from view.

Down and beyond the garden, on the road that led from the governor's house to the hills, she saw two men standing in the light of a street globe, one with the giant frame of Hector and the other with the flowing hair and beard of J.J. They had halted and were staring back, irresolute, at the house. Tica realized, suddenly, that they must have heard her call Hector's name. A tag end of their conversation came faint but clearly to her ears.

"—you think?" J.J. was saying. "We could play safe."

"No," Hector's voice was more distinct, the ring of command audible in it even at this distance, "There's no time. Let's go."

They turned away, their figures following their long shadow up the street and dwindling away toward the hills and the brush beyond. That way led to concealment and safety when the Raiders arrived; but only if enough unsuspecting people remained in town to appease their savage desires. There was no longer any doubt in Tica's mind that she and the colonists were being deliberately deserted first by their governor, and now by the bushrunners and the Commander who should have been the core of their defense. That was why she had been shunted off to a bedroom—so that her accusing voice

would be among those to be silenced by the alien. That was why Stern, wiser than she in the meanness and cowardliness of men's minds, had fled, leaving his clothing half-packed behind him.

With this abrupt realization, the last of her courage washed suddenly out of her, and she crumpled on her knees by the window, sobbing.

For a long time she let the grief flow from her, unchecked. Then, gradually, as the torment of emotions within her subsided, she rose unsteadily to her feet and blew her nose. Then she walked across the room to the liquor cabinet set in one wall of the office and poured herself a strong drink of Earth brandy. She lifted the glass in cold fingers and drank.

The brandy flowed down, turning to liquid fire inside her, shocking her out of the numbness that fear had left. She gasped, and set the glass down, looking around her.

Her strength was returning, and with it, a touch of the sureness that had dictated her actions all her life and won her the planetary junior representativenesship on Arco at twenty-three. The situation might or might not be hopeless for her and the unprotected city-people. There were some things still that could be done.

SHE stepped to the desk and the directory that lay there. She punched for the section marked CITY OFFICES, and the directory flipped open before her. The list she wanted was pitifully small—the small column of call numbers for the Fire Department Chief, Lighting Department Chief, Heating and Power Unit Chief, and a handful of others. But Tica did not hesitate. She dialed their numbers on the Communicator and sent out her calls as quickly as possible.

Two hours later, as the first brightness of dawn streaked Lamia's sky, they were all gathered in the office,

a group of worried uncertain men. She faced them with the assurance taught her by political campaigning. She had profited by the short period of time before they gathered in obedience to her summons, to change her clothes and take some benzedrine. Crisply erect, and clear-eyed, she faced them.

"I'll come straight to the point," she said. "I am Tica Smith, Junior Planetary Representative from Arco to Central Headquarters, Earth, and here are my credentials." From the desk beside her she picked up a couple of papers and handed them to the nearest man, who glanced at them, gave a short exclamation of surprise and passed them on to his neighbor. They went around the room.

Tica continued: "I came here incognito to observe the workings of the Assigned Defense Commanders System for a Committee investigating this System—a committee which I happen to head. You may have read about it, or heard some of my speeches." She paused and there were a few murmurs of assent from around the room.

"However," she went on, "the situation here has forced me to come out into the open." She paused for them to assimilate the implications of this statement, but they looked back at her, politely uncomprehending. She stiffened her resolution.

"I have been forced to take over the reins of authority here," she said. "Because the ones who should have done the job of organizing your defense have betrayed you. Your governor, Defense Commander McGarrity and the bushrunners have left you to save yourselves in whatever way you can. They've left you—run off into the bush."

Still there was no reaction from them—only the polite, dumb silence. Anger flamed up within her.

"Don't you realize what I'm saying?" she cried. Doesn't anyone of you have anything to say?" She stabbed out with

her forefinger at random, pointing out the heavy, aging man who was the city Heating and Power Unit Chief. "Don't you have anything to say?" The man looked embarrassed.

"Well, miss," he cleared his throat. "you've got to admit it does sound kind of thin."

"Thin?" she echoed, bewildered. He cleared his throat.

"It was just a few hours ago," he said, "that the Commander promised he'd open up the rifle dome before noon."

"But he was lying!" she protested.

Her words echoed away into the silence of the room. Looking around she saw the polite disbelief written on each face.

"Are you all insane?" she said. "It was just those same few hours ago that you and the rest of the city were going against McGarrity's orders in trying to surrender to the alien."

"Oh, sure," said the Fire Department Chief. "But the governor said to surrender."

"The governor!" echoed Tica. "Stern? The man who bought his votes to get into office? Don't tell me you had any faith in him!"

"I guess not," said the Fire Chief, stubbornly, "but somebody's gotta take charge. Anyway, it's none of my business." And, rising, he turned toward the door.

IN A FLASH she saw it, the key to these incomprehensible colonists of the Outer Planets. They were a little people, bewildered and scared. They expected to be led. They wanted to be led. For no one of them had the courage and belief in his own ability to take control of the rest. Seeing it, a sudden weight lifted off her. Now the situation had become clear and simple again, and she knew what to do.

"Stop," she said crisply; and the Fire Chief halted, "I am in charge

here now. All of you are under my orders. I intend to notify the nearest Military Headquarters of the defection of the Defense Commander and demand protection for Lamia. I will take the responsibility for the unsealing of the ultra-wave station; and the rest of you will supply me with the men to operate it."

Swiftly she issued her directions. . . .

The morning sun was high in the sky before they had torched through the outer doors of the ultra-wave station. The doors had been of heavy metal and the commercial cutters were weak compared to the ravaging fury of the weapon McGarrity had used to seal them together. Stony-faced, Tica had watched her little band of men work desperately, casting sidelong glances at the rest of the city populace, which, under the pressure of a sheep-like herd instinct and a pressing fear, were drifting off toward the rifle dome to await the fulfillment of Hector's promise. More than once, Tica had been tempted to turn to the local broadcast station in a nearby building and announce to all the people what she had cautioned the utility officers to keep to themselves; but she hesitated to withdraw the straw of hope from the despairing populace. However, after she had talked to the nearest Military Headquarters, she would have another to offer in its place.

The tall doors swung inward.

Tica's little group went across the threshold with a brush. They clustered around the levitator doors, eagerness thinly veiled with restraint that Tica's presence imposed as she pushed through them and entered the levitator first, herself. They crowded in behind her.

As she rose on the pressure beams, her heart lightened for the first time since her landing, for—and she faced the fact squarely—she was like the men behind her; she had no particular wish to be responsible for the people

of Lamia. Now she was scant seconds away from shifting that responsibility to the shoulders of the nearest military unit. The door of the broadcast room sank level with her and she swung it open. She had time for one lingering touch of regret that Hector had run out the way he had; for, in spite of her opinions, he had reached through to her and touched her, and she had almost begun to admire him.

Then the doors swung open and the regret was lost in horror. For Hector had sealed the station well. He had turned his handgun loose on the delicate wiring of its controls; and the place was a shambles.

Like beasts to high ground, when the spring flood freshens and spreads, the people of the city, the colonists, had been drifting all morning to the high mound of the rifle dome, towering above the brush. They had ringed it with a packed and desperate crowd, children and men and women alike. And so they waited, clinging to the hope that was beyond all reason, for some had been close to the dome and had felt the smuglet, and knew it was still alive.

It was to and through this crowd that Tica came, backed by the man who had helped to open the ultra-wave station for her. She pushed between their packed bodies to the open space that surrounded the dome and held up her hand to get their attention. It seemed to her now that there was only one thing left to be done and that was to tell them how they had been betrayed. They must be informed that Hector had never intended them to use the ultra-wave—that it was destroyed. They could do nothing now but scatter into the bush, each one taking what chance might bring him.

THE crowd watched her. She mounted a small collapsible stand that the men with her

had brought and took a portable annunciator in her hand.

"Listen to me," she said.

They looked at her, waiting.

"I am Tica Smith," she said, "Junior Representative from Arco. These men with me have looked at my credentials. They know I am the person I say I am. They will vouch for the fact that what I say is true. You have been betrayed by Commander McGarrity—"

"No!" It was a shrill cry of protest, almost a shriek from the edge of the crowd, and a short, stout man began to force his way through it toward the platform. For a moment he was lost in the eddy and swirl of the taller heads around him and then he burst out on the inside of the packed ring of staring people and ran toward Tica.

"Governor Stern!" she gasped.

He jerked the annunciator from her hand.

"Don't listen to her!" he shouted into it. "She doesn't know what's going on. She—" The men by Tica rolled over him in a wave, smothering him, tearing the annunciator from his hand.

"Let him talk!" said Tica, icily.

Wondering, the men who had been with her at the breaking in of the ultrawave plant doors, released him. He staggered to his feet, snatching back the annunciator.

"Last night," he panted, "before he sealed the ultra-wave station, Commander McGarrity called the Military Headquarters of this space sector. The aliens are coming. Detector tracers showed them heading in this direction. And the Fleet is behind them, five hours behind them. And the alien'll be here by noon. We've got to hold them off until the Fleet comes—"

There was a low moan from the crowd.

"The station will be opened," Stern went on. "Commander McGarrity has promised it!"

"Commander McGarrity has promised

it!" echoed Tica scornfully, snatching the annunciator from his hand. "Let me tell you people about Commander McGarrity and his promises. Last night he promised that if the station was not open by noon, he would let you try to surrender to the Spindle Ships. But he made sure that you would not be able to do so. I and these men with me have just cut our way into the station. Would you like to know what we found there? The ultra-wave equipment was smashed beyond repair!"

Sound swelled up once more from the crowd. And this time there was a note of hysterical fear in it, and the packed bodies swayed menacingly toward Stern. Tica waved them back.

"What do you say to that?" she demanded, handing the annunciator back to him.

"He says that the dome will be opened as promised!" interrupted the thunderous voice of another annunciator from beyond the far edge of the crowd.

QUICKLY they turned. Emerging from the bush at the edge of the cleared area was the tall figure of Hector, his clothing torn and tattered, carrying the tightly roped and squirming figure of an animal in his arms. Following him was J.J., and a swarm of the bushrunners. J.J.'s voice came clear to Tica, without the annunciator, raised in a shrill help of delight.

"Out of our way, you sheep, you fat sheep, or we'll carve a way through you!"

The crowd split wide and through the gap came Hector and the bushrunners. The men around Tica melted away from her as Hector came up; but he did no more than glance at her.

"Put that thing away," he said curtly, nodding at the annunciator she held in her hand. Numbly, like someone waking from a dream she set it

down. He turned away, setting the bound animal in his arms on the ground. Her eyes went past him to the now unfriendly, accusing eyes of the crowd. Sick inside, she turned away.

"Don't you worry none, miss." It was barely a whisper in her ear. She turned to see the boy Bonny facing her and smiling sympathetically. A surge of gratitude swept through her and she reached impulsively for his hand, but he drew away shyly.

Hector was now squatting by the squirming beast he had carried in, and cutting some of the cords that bound it. As they fell away, the shape of it was disclosed more clearly. It had a long, weasel-like snout and body of about a hundred pounds in weight. It had six short legs, and a bushy, sinuous tail with a barb in the end which lashed angrily right and left as they freed it. Its eyes were small and yellow and malevolent, not any bit afraid, but brimful of hate and viciousness. It looked at Hector with hungry longing.

When the animal remained held only by the cords that shackled its feet and jaws, Hector rose again to his feet, lifting the annunciator to his lips.

He spoke to the crowd.

"This is what I promised you," he said. "We tried every means we could think of to drive the smuglet out of the rifle-dome. When everything failed, this was left." He gestured to the animal at his feet. "Every species has its own natural enemy; and this, we believe, is the smuglet's." His lips smiled, a trifle grimly. "Nobody seems to know its proper name, but J.J., tells me that among his men it's known as the bushkiller."

THE bush-killer stared up at him with its yellow, hate-filled eyes.

"Now we'll put it into the ventila-

tor," he concluded, and set the annunciator down.

It took three men to pick up the squirming fury now that most of its bindings had been removed. They carried it to the edge of the smuglet's influence and set it down.

"Sticks!" called J.J. The bushrunners clustered around with long poles, sharp-pointed on the end, with which they hemmed in the bush-killer, back against the dome. "Bonny!"

The boy slipped away from Tica, to and through the pole-men and stood poised on the edge, knife in hand.

"Now!" said J.J.

With one fluid motion, Bonny leaped to the side of the bound animal. His knife flashed and in the same split second he was back behind the barrier of the encircling men. A hair's breadth behind him, the body of the now cut free bushkiller landed fair on the sharp points, then flung itself screaming away again.

For a second it crouched there, radiating hate. Then, as if it had suddenly forgotten the people around it, it stood up on its last two legs and sniffed the air daintily. Its sharp muzzle turned slowly clockwise and halted on a line with the torn ventilator opening.

Inside the dome the smuglet cried out for the first time—a lonely frightened sound.

Disinterestedly, the bush-killer dropped back to the ground. Suddenly three of the pole-men went backward under the impact of its leaping body. But the pole-points bore it back. Yowling with anger it paced the narrow area.

"Close in," said J.J.

The half-circle narrowed. On its two ends, the men could not get within two meters of the building, but their long sharp poles bridged the gap and slowly the bush-killer was driven back. For a moment it stood at bay. Then, with scarcely an appearance of

effort, it turned and leaped, vanishing into the black and ragged hole in the ventilator screen.

There was a moment of silence. Hector shoved through the line of police-men opposite the door and stood waiting, pressing against the outer tingle of the smuglet's power. Then suddenly a high and dreadful screaming burst from the inside of the building and the tingling vanished.

Hector leaped to the door, unlocked it and flung it wide.

The smuglet crawled from the opening, like some great gray mouse, it dragged itself on crippled forepaws, its paralyzed hindquarters furling the dust behind it. Ripped, torn, and streaked with blackish blood, it pulled itself from them away from the predator that followed, tearing at it, leaping high in feline play upon it. It shrank toward Hector and the humans, hoping, perhaps, for the blessing of a quick death.

"*Ub, ubba, uba, bu, bu—*" it choked, rising again to a shriek as the worrying shape that followed flung itself after the smuglet. The scream was cut mercifully short by the snap of Hector's handgun.

Then the bushkiller was away. Moving like a tawny streak of light, it darted down the path that was opened before it by the crowd. It had won clear and was racing for the edge of the bush when Hector, under the compulsion of a pity he had not believed himself capable of feeling, lifted his gun and sent a thin yellow bolt racing after it.

The bushkiller crumpled in mid-leap, with half of its body burned away. Even so, it turned and came thrashing back before a second shot finished it. Silence again settled in the clearing and a great sigh went up from the watching people.

Hector, his face set in a still mask, reholstered his gun; and lifted the annunciator to his lips.

"All able-bodied men form a line," he said, "and we'll hand out weapons as long as they last."

IT WAS two hours later. Inside the dome, the rifle crew were at their posts, tensely waiting. In front of the master control scanner and firing trips, Hector stood, Tica at his side.

She had not dared speak to him since he first came striding out of the bush. Now she put out a hand timidly to touch his arm.

"What?" he said, turning to look down at her.

"Do you—" she hesitated. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry?"

"For what I did," she answered. "Thinking you'd run off. Calling those men together. Breaking into the ultra-wave station." He shrugged, somewhat embarrassed.

"I don't blame you," he said. "You couldn't know what I didn't tell you. I suppose you had a right to expect the worst."

"But why?" she demanded. "Why didn't you tell me? Didn't you trust me?" He sighed; for the truth in this matter was something that it was very hard for him to admit.

"I thought you'd be safer if you didn't know," he said in a low voice. "I thought that you'd sleep through until this morning and by that time—it doesn't make sense, does it?"

She wondered at him.

"No," she said, truthfully. "It doesn't seem like you. Why should my safety concern you?"

He made a gesture of impatience with his big hands.

"You don't belong here," he said half angrily. "You don't know what you let yourself in for. I do." He checked himself, suddenly. "That's not quite straight. The truth is—hunting up the bushkiller in the hope that it could do what we couldn't, was a

gamble. A gamble with the odds on our side, but still a gamble. Several things could have gone wrong, such as not being able to find a bushkiller in time, or the beast's killing itself on the poles, instead of letting itself be forced into the ventilator. It was the sort of thing that would have given your committee a Roman holiday if it hadn't succeeded. I couldn't risk that."

"You were against me," she murmured.

"What?" he said.

"Nothing." She lifted her face to him, shaking her hair back over her shoulders. "What would you have done if the bushkiller idea hadn't worked?" He smiled wryly.

"Shoved a homemade time bomb in through the ventilator," he said. "And hoped there'd be enough handguns left in working order to fight it out on the ground." She shivered. Before she could say anything further, one of the gun crew spoke up, looking over from the scanner in front of him.

"Enemy at two-thirty-four; culmination arc, one sixteen. Six ships."

Hector's big hands moved swiftly and easily over the controls in front of him and the outlines of six pencil-shaped objects swam into the master screen before him.

"Check," he said. He spoke over his shoulder to Tica. "Stay inside the dome. And don't get in the way."

"All right." Her answer was barely pitched above a whisper, but Hector was not listening, wholly absorbed now by the controls in front of him.

"Range two by two by eight," he said.

"Range two by two by eight—check," the answer came from across the room.

"Check all stations."

"Check" — "Check" — "Check" — "Check"—the word ran around the interior of the dome as the crew spoke up from their several posts.

TICA turned away from him and moved over to the screen that showed the area outside the station. The clearing was deserted and the brush hid the armed men. The sky above looked peaceful, empty.

"Correction two by two by seven." Hector's voice went on behind her, the crew voices answering.

"Correction, two by two, by seven—check."

"On target."

There was no sound, no vibration in the big dome, no indication of the destroying beam that for a moment reached out thousands of miles into space. The quiet voices went on around her with the calm emotionlessness of bookkeepers checking accounts.

"Hit one."

"Target—check."

"Dispersal tactics, two thirty-three, by north eight-seven. Check two."

"Two-check."

"Fire."

"Correction—"

The voices went on, steadily, monotonously. The hours slipped by. In the dome, Tica, and in the bush, the colonists, waited.

The bright sun of Lamia passed its zenith and sank westward. At the screen, listening to the voices behind her, Tica was vaguely aware that the titanic, silent duel between the station and the alien had accounted for two ships. Abruptly there was a cessation of the action in the dome. She turned, surprised, to Hector.

"What happened?" she said. "Did you get them all?"

He looked at her wearily. She remembered suddenly that this man had not slept or eaten since they had landed on the planet some twenty-four hours before.

"They've ducked behind the planet to hide," he said. Hope rose in her, "Maybe they're going away."

He shook his head.

"No," he said. "They'll be back. Two

will cover from the air and two will land crews to see if they can't take the station by hand-to-hand attack." He lifted his voice to the rifle crew. "Take it easy, but watch both hemispheres."

He turned stiffly from the master screen and snapped on a pickup that connected with the men on the bush.

"Get me J.J." he said.

"Right here, Commander." The bearded slim figure took form on the pickup's screen.

"Get your men on their toes," ordered Hector. "There'll be a landing within the next thirty minutes. Remember, you fight these aliens by moving. Each man by himself. Shoot and run. A spindle-shipper is stronger than a human at close grips; but they don't understand knives, so your bushrunners may have a chance that way. If they do come close enough for knife-work, strike for the bottom of the trunk. The breathing sac is down there and once you puncture that, it paralyzes them."

"Right," answered J.J. laconically. "We'll be ready. Anything else?"

"That's all," said Hector, and broke the connection.

WITH startling abruptness, the enemy was upon them.

The office-silence of the dome was disrupted by the horrifying bedlam of war, as two ships, having crept up behind the low overcast, went roaring through the air above the station, belching flames. The riven air screamed before them and the dome rocked under the impact of their weapons, rocked on the pounded soil like a child's boat rocks on a rippled pool. Tica felt herself flung back into the chair that faced the outside screen. She clung there, frightened and desperate, while before her eyes giant hands dealt out carnage. The ground around the station was one raging red inferno. Behind her the shouted commands of Hector rang against bedlam as he traded blow for blow with the

covering ships and fenced off the horizon-hopping pair that would have landed.

"Twenty-three—six—oh! Release! Fire! Release! Fire!" The master control trips jumped in his hands as he switched suddenly from the computed aiming of the crew at the high ships to the point-blank range of the hedge-hopping pair. He tasted blood from his upper lip, split when the first concussion had hurled him against his control panel. A savage joy filled him as he fired.

The high ships were dropping as they blasted. Outside the dome glowed, and the tough stubborn metal softened and ran in reluctant drops as its outer shell melted before the direct touch of the alien beams. Inside the refrigerating unit shrieked at full capacity as its heat pump channeled the outside temperatures deep into the earth where the anchoring rock fused and bubbled under the abnormal temperatures forced upon it. Recklessly, Hector ignored the overhead attack, fighting back the would-be landing party and luring the top attackers down until suddenly he caught them in line, one behind the other. Then suddenly abandoning all his ground defense, he threw full power on the lead ship.

It glowed, shone, and suddenly, like a black mouth opening, a dark hole melted in its armor. Unchecked, the sudden beam raved through it; and like a crippled crazy thing, it flung itself floundering backward and its own weapons broke a path for the rifle beam through the defenses of its sister ship. For a second they hung like two flaring comets in Hector's screen, then swung together. The heavens vanished in a sudden, silent wash of white and brilliant light.

These two space craft were gone. But the other two had landed.

Hector turned and flung himself at the pickup. But it was dead. He turned again, thrusting Tica roughly from the

outside screen and looked through it.

The bush no longer hid the city from the dome. Now one large cinderous area surrounded the rifle, wide enough to leave the dome in plain sight. In the tangled area beyond, the two remaining ships were hidden and even now the barrel-bodied, stumpy-armed alien would be pouring out of them for their march to take the dome and thus disarm the city.

Hector jiggled once more with the pickup, then, discarding it, threw the switches that broke free and opened the half-melted dome door. It swung back, and, motioning the rifle crew to stay where they were, he hurdled the blistering sill and ran for the bush, his sidearm held loosely in one big hand.

Behind him a wave of heat from the half-cooked metal of the outer shell washed back into the dome and the rifle crew hurriedly closed the door and took their posts for the last defense of the dome that might come if Hector and J.J., with the riflemen, could not stop the alien fighters. And in front of the outside screen, Tica waited, and watched.

HECTOR ran easily, at a loping dog-trot. The only haste was his urge to reach J.J., as soon as possible. For speed was no defense. If any of the alien had already managed to reach the fringe of bush on the edge of the burnt area, Hector was a sitting duck. He could only hope that the humans had held them.

But no guns winked, and no alien beams whispered their pale yellow death at him. He reached the bush in safety.

Now his tactics changed. He went warily forward, his handgun at the ready, slipping from one piece of cover to the other, for to come suddenly on his own men might be easily as bad as coming so upon the alien.

He moved like a shadow through

the bush, in the general direction of where he knew J.J.'s men should be. And as he went a murmur rose on the soft air, a murmur that as he approached it, grew in volume until the separate sounds that made it up could be faintly distinguished. From a long distance they came and he knew them well. The sounds of the fighting mad, the wounded and the dying.

He came to where J.J.'s command post should have been. But the trampled clearing was empty, except for one dead man, his head half burnt away. The corpse lay beside the pickup that should have answered Hector's call from the dome. Battle had been joined not far from here, it seemed, and then swung westward. Hector leaned down, took the dead man's knife and pushed on toward the sound.

The first encounter came without warning, a slight breath of air, the hint of a color half-seen for a flash with the corner of an eye, and the swish and fall of one of the purple trees beam-cut through at his side.

He dropped; and rolled. A second later the pale yellow beam sliced the earth where he had lain. Grimly, his gun before him, he wriggled a circuitous route toward its source.

When he had reached a point of safety, he raised his head cautiously behind the screen of a bush's many narrow leaves and looked. For a moment he saw nothing. Then there was a slight stir among the foliage twenty yards away and a spindle-shipper stepped into view. He stopped, and stood there, a heavy gun cradled in his short round arm, his stocky body upright and stolid-looking except for the erectile flaps of his sense-organs that waved gently to all quarters of the compass. Hector lifted his gun, sighted and squeezed. The alien went down, thrashing, half burnt in two, but still alive with the astounding vitality of his race.

Hector turned and ran. The sound of the dying alien would draw others

of his own race to him. Since the spindle-shippers were between him and the humans, this might create a gap in their line through which he could reach J.J. and his men.

He ran, shouting his name to warn the humans to hold their fire. For a long moment he had no answer; and he had time to think that possibly he had made a mistake and that the humans were not where he thought they might be. Then a shrill whoop answered him and he stumbled over a small bushy hillock, to sprawl panting among a roughly-dressed group of bushrunners.

He rolled over on his back and struggled for breath. A dry chuckle made him turn his head and discover J.J. The bearded bushrunner was squatting not ten feet from him, one eye cocked in the direction that Hector had come, a gun in his hands.

"You sure sounded like your pants were on fire, Commander," he said. "I—" He interrupted himself suddenly, whipped the gun to his shoulder and fired. "Got him," he continued calmly. "I figured there'd be at least one following you up."

He rose and strolled over to stand looking down at Hector, who, somewhat recovered, pushed himself up to a sitting position.

"I couldn't get you on the pickup," he said. "The man on your end's killed. What's the situation here?" J.J. frowned.

"So Cary's dead," he said. "He always was kind of careless. Well, I'll tell you, Commander. We aren't holding them. Not by a damn sight. You want to know why?"

"Of course," answered Hector. J.J. grinned without humor.

"Those city-sheep have been plain ungrateful," he said. "They just didn't appreciate those shiny new guns you handed out at all. Just about all of them have sneaked off and cut for the hills."

"Didn't you stop them?" demanded Hector sharply.

"The boys have been kind of busy with these here walking barrels," he said, dryly, "if you've noticed."

IN SILENCE Hector accepted the rebuke. The bushrunners were his only ground force.

"How do things stand now?" he asked. J.J., hunkered down beside him and, picking up a stick, began to draw in the soft loose earth with it.

"The ships are here and here," he said, diagramming. "When they first landed, we tried to surround them, but they broke through right off and started to spread toward the rifle dome. I figured they might head straight for the city, but—"

"They won't," interrupted Hector. "It won't be safe for them to take off as long as the rifle is operating. They'll have to destroy it first before they try any looting."

J.J. nodded.

"Anyway," he went on, "they pushed us back. Now this circle here is the open space around the rifle. This is their line at right angles to it, and this is ours. They keep trying to swing us in against it and we keep fading away in front of them, so the whole fight is sort of spiraling in on it. In half—maybe three quarters of an hour—we're going to be up on the edge, both them and us. What happens then, I don't know."

"I do," said Hector. "I've fought them before. They'll try to rush the dome under covering fire, and hold position there long enough to mine it. They don't worry about loss of life. Once at the dome, they'll try to hold half the edge of the clearing. Then we won't be able to fire into them from the opposite side. It'll end up as a hand-to-hand around the dome. Have you got some good men for that?"

"Commander," drawled the bushrunner, "they're all good men for that."

"All right," said Hector. "Let's get going."

They fell back, firing as they went.

In the rifle dome, Tica waited.

It was deathly still in there. The rifle crew had dogged down the sealing door over the ventilator and they were running on compressed air from the storage tanks. The anchor beams that held them solid to the great field of igneous rock two miles beneath the surface of the earth, were locked in place and the main door was fused tight. There was nothing left but the waiting.

Seated in front of the outside scanner, Tica watched. It was as if she sat, disembodied, on the high muzzle of the rifle itself and looked out over the wasted area and the brush beyond. Of the fight proper, nothing was visible to her. Only occasionally she caught the momentary shimmer of beams like cloud-trapped rays of sudden sunshine in a room; and the audio brought the hoarse murmur of the battle sounds distantly to her ear.

But that was enough. Little by little, by these signs and tokens, she could see the battle drawing steadily closer to the blasted clearing and the dome. She watched in helpless fascination as this approached until, at last, both sides were there, the aliens in one rough half-circle hidden in the brush to the north. The humans in an identical half-circle to the south.

Then the yellow beams began to play across the four-mile distance of open ground. The dome, caught in the crossfire, glowed momentarily red where a beam would hit, then faded quickly back to the massy gray of its normal color. For several long minutes the gun battle went on. Then suddenly, from the alien side of the clearing, a horde of the stumpy creatures burst, charging on the dome.

They were not fast—not nearly so fast as men might be—but their advance had a pounding inexorability about it. They moved within a screen of their own living flesh, an outer ring tight-packed about those in the center to catch the impact of the beams from

the human side of the natural arena. An inner group fired over the lumpy shoulders of the others, and moved swiftly to take the place of those in the outer ring that fell.

They left their dead behind them to mark their path, gray writhing bodies or still corpses, against the cindered black, like the flaky shedding of some monster snake. But they came on.

NOW the firing redoubled on the human side. Soon from the tattered bush there sprung a loose wave of humans—smaller, more scattered, but swifter than the alien. Scattered, not bunched, they raced across the blasted ground toward the dome and the gray approaching horde, their shrill yells echoing on the afternoon air.

Dodging, shifting, leaping, like leaves in an autumn wind, they ran. And like leaves they fell to the alien guns beaming from the far side of the clearing. But speed was with them and the open pattern of their charging. They had started later than the alien group, but they were gaining. They had gained. By the time they were three quarters of the way to the dome, the lost ground had been made up.

Now they were close. Now the dome shielded nearly all of them from opposing fire. Now they had reached it, just as the alien came up from the other side and the area around the silent muzzle of the space rifle became a straining, struggling mass of white and gray bodies.

So the end came. Neither side could now fire into the stabbing, close locked bodies around the dome. The time for guns was over. The time for hand to hand combat was here. From both sides, the embattled groups streamed forth onto the field and dust rose as they closed together. Beneath it, man to alien, alien to man, in single combat they locked and swayed.

Above, like an invisible spirit, Tica

twisted the controls of the scanner, searching through the dust and haze for the tall figure of Hector. As if she had been a silent ghost drifting through the carnage, the combat unreeled before her, from the close-packed dogfight around the dome to the scattered battle farther out. Faces, bodies, half-glimpsed, came and went—a bushrunner with his left arm torn away, sinking the knife held in his right hand to its handle in the enemy who had dismembered him. A boy of Bonny's age, his mouth stretched open in a scream as the thick arms of an alien bent him back until his spine cracked and he dangled like a broken doll. Then at last she found Hector.

He was one of a group with J.J. and some others who were grimly hacking their way toward the dome. He towered, berserk, taller than the aliens, taller than the humans that surrounded him. The long bushrunner's knife in his hand flashed as he sliced his way through the pack of gray bodies to the dome. Like furious, leaping rats they flung themselves upon him. He shook them off, his knifeblade slick with the sheen of the oily ooze from the alien gashed bodies. Savagely he fought his way to the dome, to the dome's very door. And then the press of combat cut him off from the men behind him and he went down beneath a wave of aliens, that rolled over him and hid him at last from view.

He did not rise again.

CHILLED and weak with a strange, numb sickness, Tica turned from the screen and walked unsteadily across to a dark corner of the dome. The upcurving metal wall stopped her and she put her hands against it, leaning her hot forehead against the smooth metal. She did not cry. She did not faint. She merely stood there, at last beyond all feeling. And the dome, the crew, the battle passed away from her like

a forgotten dream, so that she walked alone in the hell that she had made herself and lay in the grave that she herself had dug. For a long time she suffered silently, until she was aware of a voice speaking from a great distance and a hand on her shoulder. Whose she did not know.

Slowly, she came back to the world of the living. The voice was the voice of one of the gun crew. It was his hand on her shoulder, gently insistent. "Miss," he was saying, "Miss, it's all over."

Dumbly, she nodded and turned from the wall. The heavy door was once more broken open and stood wide. Fresh dusty air eddied in through the wide opening and the clearing beyond was silent. She walked toward it.

She stepped over the sill and onto the ground. From bush line to ragged, blackened line of bush, the bodies lay, in groups, in pairs and singly. For a long moment she looked, and then, as if driven by a terrible compulsion, she turned toward the mound of bodies where she had seen Hector fall. She walked toward them. Reaching down, she felt for the first time the touch of alien flesh as her small hands closed about a thick gray arm, and she tutted.

Slowly the body came loose and tumbled from the pile. Straining, she seized the next and was aware of hands helping her. The crewman had followed her out and was pulling with her.

Together they lifted the bodies off until there were no more to lift. They stood, looking down at Hector.

"I'm sorry, Miss," said the crewman, awkwardly.

She knelt, and with the corner of her tunic, wiped the dust gently from the silent face.

And the lips moved. A whisper of breath husked from the dry throat.

"He's alive!" cried the crewman.

"Alive?" she echoed stupidly. The

words had no meaning for her. "Alive?"

"He's alive!" repeated the crewman. He straightened suddenly, turning swiftly to the two great silver ships with their Frontier Guard insignia blazing in the sun halfway on the open space now between dome and city. "I'll go get help."

He ran off. Tica continued to kneel by Hector, without understanding.

The crewman came back with four men in black Guard uniforms and a power litter. She watched them load Hector carefully on it and saw it shoot swiftly into the air on its way to the spaceship. But still she felt nothing. The spaceships, the litter, nothing was real. Reality had stopped for her with the sight of Hector going down under the smother of gray bodies.

She turned away.

"Better stop her," the voice of one of the uniformed men came dimly to her ears. "She's in a bad state of shock."

But no one had time. There were too many wounded to be attended.

She wandered among the dead, not understanding. Something heavy and cold within her drove her on. Twilight was darkening the field when she came at last to J.J., squatted beside a figure on the ground.

The bearded bushrunner looked up at her for the first time with no mockery in his eyes.

"You and me both," he said simply; and pointed down "Look."

THE still figure was Bonny. Tica knelt on the other side of him. The boy was breathing shallowly, but his eyes were closed and there was a trickle of blood from one corner of his mouth. Tica reached down automatically to wipe it away.

"Leave be," said J.J., holding her hand back. "It's no use. He's been crushed." She took her hand back and he looked at her with sad bitterness.

"You didn't know, did you?" he said. "He's my kid." His eyes lifted and strayed around the field.

"Him—and these others," he said. "All were good boys I knew. All gone. And down there's the city, not even touched. And back there in the hills are those shopkeeping cowards—all safe and whole."

Distantly across the field came a shout.

"J.J.! Come here. We need you!"

The bushrunner rose to his feet, looking down.

"I guess I got to go," he said. "Stick with him, will you? It won't be for long."

But he lingered still for a moment, looking down at the dying boy, and the woman kneeling beside him.

"Tell me," he said, with sudden abrupt bitterness. "What good are cities?"

"J.J.!" cried the voice again, imperatively. He turned and went.

Tica stayed.

The boy's breathing continued shallowly. Numbly, Tica knelt, watching. Finally there was a slight choke in his throat. A new little trickle of blood flowed out, and Bonny opened his eyes. His eyes focused with effort on the face above him.

"Miss?" he whispered wonderingly. "Miss?"

"Sh-h," she answered automatically. "Don't talk." He made a feeble effort to raise his head, but could not.

"They kind of got me, Miss."

"No," she said. "No." But the lie stuck in her throat. He shook his head feebly, a fraction of an inch.

"Yes," he said, huskily. "I can tell." There was a second's pause during which he fought for breath.

"Listen," he said, urgently. "I got a couple of things I'd like to tell you."

"You mustn't talk."

"Listen!" he said, and his voice was stronger now. "That's something you got to get over—this telling people

(Continued on page 98)



THE MAD DOMNEYS

By VERNE CHUTE

They were just an average, normal family before the coming of Cecil, who disrupted the household—and how!

NOONDAY sunlight streamed in through the big bay window with its southern exposure, making a lacy pattern on the plain nine-by-twelve rug, which had cost Ann Domney twenty-eight dollars at Hallock's. Oliver Cromwell Domney's paces across the shaft of light

made it flash off and on like the electric sign on his "New, Used and Out-Of-Print Bookshop" over on the main street of Lakeland.

Oliver glowered at his assembled family. Five were there. The sixth, happily, was absent. It was this sixth and newest member of the household

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that was the thorn in Domney's side.

For a genial, good-natured bookseller with one eye almost constantly in the *Publishers' Weekly*, Mr. Domney wasn't running true to form. His short, squat figure didn't lend itself very well to long-distance pacing, either. At the moment he looked more like a man who had been wrestling with a stevedore than with the strange esoteric problem that had dumped itself at his fireside. His hair was mussed, his shirt collar lay limp against his perspiring neck and the tail end of his shirt was exposed most indecorously.

The problem this time, Domney thanked his stars, wasn't the usual family lament about having to live on the *wrong side of town*. Yet this one was much more important.

"MY DECISION is made," he cried suddenly. "He's got to go, and I don't care if he tells all of Lakeland. We never invited him here in the first place." His voice weakened. "Every time I'm ready to ask him to leave he looks at me with those funny eyes of his—and I'm speechless. I don't understand it. I can't even argue with him. I think he's got us hypnotized—damn!"

"Oliver!" Ann Domney gave her husband a wifely look of disapproval. Her nice eyes, seemingly awed by the preview of her husband's shirt tail, came off their target long enough to turn a sideward glance at her three children—Sally and Quincy, who were of high-school age, and little Chagrell.

Domney muttered on. . . .

"Sh-h-h," Ann cautioned. "He may be listening. Your shirt, dear. And, please, don't be so agitated."

"Agitated?" howled Domney. "I never get agitated!" He began stuffing his errant shirt tail into his pants pocket much to the delight of Sally and Quincy. Little Chagrell shrieked with all the exuberance of his six precocious years.

"You're funnier even than Cecil," he cried out.

Cecil! That name to the rest of the Domneys was like the cry of "fire!" in a crowded theater. The Domneys almost held their breath.

Then Sally was uncurling her slim legs from the head of the leather couch. She nervously looked at the mantel clock. It was nearly time to get back to school. *Across the tracks. On the right side of town!* Deserting the couch, she essayed the piano stool, flitting between the two like a canary with two perches.

"Will you light?" howled her father.

Then he was staring through the beaded partières of eucalyptus buds at the hall phone. He was having an idea. He made a dash for the phone, dialed a number. He swung around, stared back at his family. A half-defiant look was in his eyes. "The library," he exclaimed. "Now we can settle the question, for once and for all. There's just one thing I want them to tell me—just one thing!"

Domney had always considered the public library as unfair competition. Yet they'd never know. He cleared his throat, indicating to his family that he had made his connection and that someone was answering from the other end of the line. Domney knew it to be the anemic, unimaginative Miss Purdy.

He said: "Domney's New and Used Books—no, no, I mean this is Mr. Domney. Oliver Domney. Say, young woman, I'm calling for information. Yes, information. I want to find out something about cats—do cats ever talk?"

There was a pause. Then Domney nodded into the mouthpiece, said fervently. "Yes, yes, that's it. Any kind of cat—alley cat, Persian, Angora, Siamese, Manx—any of them. Do they ever talk? Yes, of course, in English!"

Domney stopped shouting. He paled, pulled his ear back from the wall. His lips formed strong, silent words. Then his indignation boiled over.

"Of course I'm not drunk!" Domney

slammed the receiver back on the hook.

SALLY'S face reflected her father's hopeless look. "At school they're already calling us the 'Mad Monkeys,'" she declared.

"Do they?" put in Quincy, adding, "as if it wasn't bad enough for us to be *dated*."

"Oh," said Ann Domney: Then she looked startled. "Dated?" She turned dutifully toward her husband for an explanation.

Domney shook his head, went on with his pacing.

"Quincy, you explain it so mother can understand," Sally said. "Oh, well, I'll do it. Mother, being 'dated' is like having button shoes...a horse and buggy...bay windows...like living on the wrong side of town."

This was plain enough for Ann Domney. "Oh," she said again, looking hopelessly at her husband.

But Domney was hitching up his trousers like a woodchopper getting ready to go to work. "By Jupiter! I'll order him out of the house!"

"But, dear, you *did* bring Cecil home with you from the bookshop, you know," Ann Domney reminded her irate husband. "That night you brought home that bundle of specially old books."

"I did not!" Mr. Domney repudiated this accusation indignantly. "I merely put him out of the shop and said scat. I couldn't have him sitting there in the window and riffling through the pages of books like a college professor bent on research, could I? What would people say? And I couldn't tell people where he came from, because I didn't know. Just suddenly, that first day, he was there. And how on earth could I tell *anybody* that Cecil could talk?"

Mrs. Domney sighed again and closed her troubled eyes. Then suddenly her face wound up in a strange, incredulous smile. "Say, maybe it's *us*! If no one else heard him say those things?"

Domney looked startled. "Maybe we are crazy. Yet when he first showed up at the store he seemed all right—until he began to read and talk to me when we were alone. But at home—ow!" He smacked the top of his head. "When I opened the back door and let him come inside I was a jackass!"

"What's a jackass?" piped up the shrill voice of the six-year-old.

Domney gave his offspring a gloomy look. "A jackass, my son, is a dealer in second-hand, rare and out-of-print books. And when I let Cecil come inside, what did he say at once?"

Quincy came to life long enough to give the answer, the answer they all knew by heart. "Do you have any salmon? Not the pink, the *red*."

Sally gave a mocking laugh. "Such gall. He always has to have the best. You'd think he was the mayor of Lakeland, instead of a tramp! Not the pink, the *red*!" she mocked.

"Mother"—this from the pride and joy—"why did Cecil want the *red*?"

"Hush, Shaggs—I mean, Chagrell. Red salmon is considered the best." She turned sympathetic eyes upon the twins. "I'm sorry, dears, about what they say at school. We should never have mentioned Cecil, nor—nor had that stage manager here. Cecil was hurt by that. He said it was to—to—profane his art."

"You're always sticking up for him," protested Quincy.

ANN DOMNEY had no answer, and Oliver Domney seemed to have run out of words. He sank into the folds of the plain leather couch. It groaned and protested as the stuffing crunched beneath his weight. One of the coiled springs caught momentarily, then released with a "*ping*" that jarred Domney's thoughts and brought him halfway to his feet. What he said under his breath was no blessing.

Sally's voice broke the strained silence. "I'd say *drowned* him!"

"No, darling," Ann Domney hastened to correct. "Not *drowned* him, *drown* him—why, Sally! What are you saying? You'd feel differently if Cecil were in his grave." She looked toward her husband.

But Mr. Domney, who could quote anything from Beowulf to Edgar Guest, had nothing to say. His well-chosen words fled from him. He stared toward the head of the couch and his muttering ran together, turned into one startled bleat.

A cat had moved into view from behind the couch.

And what a cat! No Persian, Angora, Siamese, this one—nor was he like any other cat in the world. Slowly and gracefully he walked to the center of the room, as silent and dignified as if he were consort to Bastet, the Egyptian cat goddess. Even his color defied description, although in the light of the parlor, it seemed to hold to a sheen of powdered blue and gray.

Stretching himself, he sat up, as proud and pompous as the upright statuette of the cat usually found in art stores.

"Nice day," he said politely. Looking sideward at Sally and at Mrs. Domney, he added significantly, "I was asleep—most of the time."

Sally (a silly little thing, Cecil had once said) looked scared. "Oh," she cried, and moved closer to her mother. "I really didn't mean what I said—about *drowning*."

"*Drowning*," said Cecil, looking at the elder Domney.

Mrs. Domney smiled uneasily. "I do hope you had a nice sleep." She nodded at her husband to say something.

Domney's face was the color of red salmon, and Cecil didn't embarrass him further. Yet his gesture was patronizing to the extent of showing the Domneys that they were being well repaid for the favor of his society.

"It seems," he reflected, "that someone mentioned something about a grave."

Ann Domney's face flamed. Then she bit her lip and looked at Sally. Cecil went on, quoting:

*"For rain it hath a friendly sound
To one who's six feet under
ground;
And scarce the friendly voice or
face
A grave is such a quiet place."*

Domney moved at last, came to life. "*Renascence*," he said. "Edna St. Vincent Millay."

Cecil nodded quite gravely. "Excellent. Most excellent."

Domney almost looked pleased. Looked pleased until he happened to notice the stark, accusing eyes of his family. Basking in the approval of a cat, they seemed to say. Domney crunched back into the depths of the horsehair couch.

Amused tolerance was heavy in Cecil's slanty blue eyes, then. He regarded the Domneys more closely, as though he considered this family a strange species, but a trifle uninteresting. He turned his head, indulged in an expansive yawn. Then he purred softly:

"Whoever it was who said 'He who sleeps, eats' was wrong." He looked naively at one paw then at the other. "Perhaps there is a spot of red salmon in the ice-box."

Cecil's subtle request brought quick action from Mrs. Domney. She rose quickly, flung open the dining-room door and hurried toward the kitchen.

Oliver Domney's brow was furrowed as he mumbled to himself. "Let's see, 'He who sleeps, eats.' Ah, that was..."

"It is a Spanish proverb," said Cecil helpfully.

Cecil moved back, sat down with his paws in front of him. He proudly watched his tail curl over them. It was a beautiful tail, as blue and smoky as the sky above

a brush fire. He was very proud of that tail. He looked sympathetically at little Shaggs, then at the twins. They had no tails, nor did the elder Domneycy have a tail.

Evidently Cecil decided not to say anything of their shortcomings, although it seemed that if there was any talking to do it would be up to him. The Domneycys knew it was funny about them. They chattered continually when he was out of sight, but let him put in an appearance and they were suddenly struck dumb.

Cecil watched Domneycy sink deeper into the protesting leather. "I can see that Aunt Sarah is due for a visit," he said pointedly.

Domneycy started. Then he said weakly, "We brought the couch up from the basement today. Please don't say anything."

Cecil didn't commit himself. Then he must have forgotten all about Aunt Sarah as a heavenly odor was wafted in from the kitchen. When the attar of salmon became too irresistible, Cecil lowered his eyes. With the unhurried, dignified restraint of his royal blood, he moved toward the kitchen.

The parlor Domneycys thawed back to life. Little Shaggs, to whom nothing was sacred, cried out: "Go catch a mouse!"

"Shaggs!" cried the elder Domneycy.

But it was too late. Cecil had halted. Visibly shocked, he turned around and spoke icily.

"Mr. Domneycy, you seem to have little control over your moronic offspring. Catch a mouse, indeed! What does he think I am?" Cecil's azure eyes narrowed with sudden pity. "It is regrettable that your illustrious name should be carried on by such as he. Now, your grandfather—"

Domneycy went pale at Cecil's reference to his ancestral paterfamilias. "Leave my grandfather out of this!" he shouted.

Cecil looked startled at the extent of Domneycy's outburst. "Very well," he said stiffly, "A secret is a secret. Just

don't shout." He swung around, took another sniff of the essence of *salmo salar* and strolled on to the kitchen.

Sally grabbed her father's hand. "Dad, what was it about your grandfather?"

Quincy's eyes flashed with boyish eagerness. "Was he a pirate, maybe—or a bandit?"

Domneycy shook his head vaguely. Stumbling to his feet, he glared toward the kitchen. He was nearing the breaking point.

"Me!" he cried. "Me buffaloeed by a cat! Madness, that's what it is. I am mad. Mad!!!!"

"I am but mad north-northwest," Cecil quoted from the doorway.

"When the wind is southerly I know a hawk from a handsaw...."

"Hamlet!" shouted Domneycy. Catching up his hat he ran from the house.

AN HOUR later the phone rang in Domneycy's Old, Rare and Out-of-print Bookshop. Oliver Domneycy jumped nervously almost ran into his only customer, a lady who seemed intent on buying a book. Domneycy juggled the receiver loose, heard the excited voice of his wife.

"Come home at once," she implored. "Cecil is leaving."

"What?" Then, "Oh, he is, is he? Well, that's just fine. Let him go!"

"But that's not it," wailed his wife. "Do you know where Cecil's going?"

Domneycy didn't. But his wife didn't keep him guessing. "He's going over to Mrs. Ames! And you know Mrs. Ames!"

Domneycy did. Everybody in town knew the number one gossip of Lakeland. Ann Domneycy whispered. "Cecil says something about your grandfather. What is it about your grandfather?"

Domneycy let out a yell that jeopardized the sale of a dime book. While his customer stared, Domneycy waved his free arm and shouted. "No cat's going to tell me where to head in. Let me

speak to him! No, hold him. I'm on my way home!"

Domney jammed the receiver back on the hook, reached for his hat and coat. He grabbed an armful of books, which he was forever "stealing" from stock, ushered the lady toward the door.

"Sorry, closing," he told her. "I've got to go home to talk to our cat!"

* * *

Cecil moved majestically back and forth in the dining-room. His tail indicated his emotion. And so it was with all cats. When a cat's tail is held straight out behind it he is concentrating on the hunt; when it is lashing from side to side he is angry; when it curls tightly against his body he is scared or worried. But when it is held high, it means success, contentment. Cecil's tail floated above his head like a proudly carried banner.

The side door banged open. Cecil leaped backward, his blue hair standing. Domney rushed into the room, saw Cecil and slid two feet across the floor on a throw rug.

Cecil recovered himself. "You seem to be in a hurry," he remarked.

Domney blinked. "Yes," he said, catching his breath. "I was—in a hurry."

"No doubt your haste is indicative of the news you have heard," Cecil suggested. "It is true. I am taking quarters with the lovely Mrs. Ames, who I notice takes two quarts of milk each morning. Certified. I am certain that she will feel remunerated by my presence."

Domney took a deep breath, said earnestly, "Let's talk this over, man to man—I mean, cat to cat—er—I don't know what I mean. Say we've got to have a showdown!"

Cecil watched his host with apparent amusement. "Please do not get yourself excited. It says in your genealogy in the bottom bookcase that your family is susceptible to fainting spells."

But Domney was thinking of Mrs. Ames again. He waved abstractedly toward her house. "You can't go over to that old battle-axe's!"

"I don't choose to barter. Still, if I remain, there is also the question of a book."

"What book?"

Cecil turned away. "The book to which I have reference is that of Phineas de Piedra. I am the avatar of Lest who was consort to Bastet, Egyptian cat goddess. My communication with earthly things is through the passages of Phineas de Piedra. Where the book goes, so go I. I am—" Cecil broke off with a very un-catlike oath.

OLIVER DOMNEY hadn't heard a word. He was anxiously helping his wife through the kitchen. She was loaded down with packages—antipastos, shrimp, imported sardines, two bottles of certified milk.

"Did you tell him?" Ann asked her husband. She saw Cecil then and amended. "Did you two have a nice talk? Oliver, you know, is going to bring home a case of red salmon, and we're to have delivered three bottles of certified milk. Three!" She shuffled the packages so Cecil would be sure to see them.

"Cecil is staying," said Domney quickly.

Ann laughed nervously. "We—we hope you'll be very happy here, Cecil."

"Mohammed," said Cecil, speaking in parables again, "cut off a piece of his cloak rather than disturb his cat asleep on it. Cardinal Richelieu numbered among his friends, his cats."

"What about Napoleon?" demanded Domney.

Cecil shuddered. "Don't mention his name. He was an aileurophobe."

"That's what I'm getting to be," cried Domney, his temper simmering close to the top. "Yes, a cat-hater. Everybody in Lakeland thinks I'm crazy. My business is gone. I'm going broke."

Cecil looked hurt. "So it is riches you prefer rather than honor and a good name." He was thoughtful for a moment. Then he mused, "Your grandfather also preferred worldly goods."

"Never mind my grandfather!" shouted Domney. He looked into the horrified eyes of Ann. "Yes, that's it. My grandfather was hanged in England for stealing a horse. What of it? What of it, I say?" He swung around to Cecil. "Of course, it's money I want. It's the basis upon which we work, it's—" He stopped short, gasping. "Me," he cried wildly. "Me, arguing with a cat!"

Ann looked at Cecil. Her eyes were imploring. "Please don't mind Oliver; he's all wrought up. And please don't go over to that horrible Mrs. Ames."

Cecil jumped lightly upon a chair. "I will stay," he said with resignation. His eyes closed. "Perhaps it is better that I have my last days in comfort."

Domney came out of his stupor, blinked. He tried to keep the hope out of his voice. "You don't feel well? You mean, you're going to—die?"

"I have but a few days of Brahma left."

"Oh, my," said Ann sympathetically.

Domney tried to assume a look of deep concern. "A few days of Brahma, you say?"

Cecil opened one eye. "Please don't become alarmed."

Domney's eyes squinted with rising suspicion. "How long is a day of Brahma?" he demanded.

Cecil opened his other eye. "A day of Brahma," he recited, "is a hundred days of Maya; and each day of Maya is a thousand years."

Domney was staggered. "He has but a few days of Brahma left," he said weakly. "A few hundred thousand years!"

A warning shout, and Quincy and Sally came piling in through the back way. They were full of news. The hotel company, which had been con-

templating buying up part of Lakeland for a resort, had decided on East Lakeland, a mile from Domney's store. If this was true, the present town property would be almost worthless. The town would move eastward.

But Oliver Domney really groaned when he saw something that dwarfed the hotel company problem into insignificance. Outside at the curb, a cab was unloading its prim, spindly-looking passenger. Aunt Sarah.

Domney looked like a man whose number had come up on bank night when he wasn't there. With a smile on his face that looked like a caricature, he went to meet his sister.

WHEN the Domneys finished swarming over dear Aunt Sarah they bore her into the parlor. Then they froze into silence. Their rapid fire talk stopped as though cut off with a knife. Cecil was sitting at the head of the horse-hair couch washing his face with his paws. He looked solemnly at Aunt Sarah, at the couch, then at Mr. Domney. But he said nothing.

Aunt Sarah, a frail, voicy creature, was doing all the talking, anyway. She gave Cecil a superficial glance.

"Well," she said. "Well. So this is your cat that talks, is it? Personally, I hate cats." She smiled coldly at Cecil. "Go ahead—talk! Say something!"

The Domneys stared, aghast. But nothing happened. Cecil inspected one upraised paw, then closed his slanty eyes.

Aunt Sarah rambled on. "Ann, you and Oliver have a strange sense of humor. You had me really frightened when you wrote me that your cat could talk." She raised her eyebrows. "Oliver, such fantastic jokes are bad for the children."

"Yes, yes, Sarah." Domney took a deep breath, added lamely, "It was all in fun."

He sank more deeply into the horse-hair couch. It gave him a chance to

change the subject. "Sarah, this couch is a dandy. We all like it, don't we children?"

Sally and Quincy nodded dutifully. Mrs. Domney turned fearful eyes upon Cecil. She said defiantly, "It is a beautiful couch."

Cecil merely stifled a yawn, placidly rubbed his paw across his face. Then he jumped lightly off the couch and moved out of the room.

Shagg's thin voice broke the silence. "I like to play on the couch, too. Mother, can we take it back to the cellar when Aunt Sarah goes home?"

A crash interrupted Aunt Sarah's quick query. Mr. Domney had fallen off the couch.

While her husband got frantically to his feet, Mrs. Domney tried to explain. "Oliver's nerves have been terrible. Shaggs—I mean, Chagrell—is always plaguing us about having that couch for his own. But of course it belongs right here." She gave Chagrell a slight push. "Better run along now and play. Sarah, you will stay for dinner, of course."

Aunt Sarah blinked. "Dinner? Why, I expect to be here for a month."

* * *

With Aunt Sarah's visit a measure of sanity came back to the Domney household. Before the week ended normalcy had returned. Cecil's presence was a constant threat, yet he hadn't spoken once, nor had the subject of the horse-hair couch been raised again.

Yet Aunt Sarah was suspicious of the family's asserted love of the couch. They overdid it; in the evenings they raced to be the first to enjoy it. They had mock fights of the privilege of sitting on it.

Cecil watched the antics of the Domneys with scorn and pity. He said nothing. His life seemed to flow along the normal channel of caty existence. He slept much in the daytime, fared forth at night to discuss, possibly, feline

problems with the local members of his race.

Then, one afternoon Aunt Sarah got little Chagrell alone.

"Chagrell," she coaxed, and there was artifice in her words. "Tell Aunt why you like the couch so well."

"Because Mama and Daddy do."

Cecil, who was half-asleep on a footstool, opened one eye.

"And, why," persisted Aunt, "do Mama and Daddy like it so much?"

Cecil got hurriedly to his feet. For once he lost his dignity and galloped from the room. Shaggs' words followed him. "They like the couch because you are going to leave your money to Daddy."

AUNT SARAH was gone when Domney came home that evening. Domney was too full of bad news to notice her absence at once. The reports seemed to be true about the hotel company building in East Lakeland. The store and lot he planned to sell would no longer interest them.

Domney failed to see the stark look in Ann's eyes as he told her about it. "People are talking, too. They seem afraid to come into the store. I guess they really think we're mad."

"You're not *mad* now," promised Ann. "Wait till you hear about Aunt Sarah."

"What? What about Aunt Sarah?"

"Gone!" Ann waved her hand in a hopeless gesture. She told him what Shaggs had said.

Domney's spirits sank to a new low. "She could have helped us," he moaned. "I was counting on it. Ann, I haven't told you how badly we needed a loan from Sarah. With the children in high school and Shaggs coming along, we've had to keep up. That extra money didn't come from the business—it's money I've borrowed to keep us going. An out-of-town concern. Now everybody will hear about it!"

"Oh, Oliver," breathed his wife. Then her troubled eyes softened and she patted his shoulder.

"You might as well have the rest of it," said Domney, sinking to the couch. "Loan's overdue. Friday is the last day."

Ann Domney's frightened eyes lingered on his face. "Oliver, please don't worry. Something is bound to come up."

"Not a chance," said Domney. "I'll have to dance to their music!"

"Music?" said Cecil from the doorway. "'Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter. . .'"

"Keats," groaned Domney, seeming not to notice that Cecil had begun to talk again.

"Shelley," Cecil corrected. He licked the crumbs of red salmon from his chops, looked humbly out of the window. "Perhaps it was Keats. . ."

An hour later two visitors were shown into the parlor by Mrs. Domney. The man with the brief-case told her they must see her husband at once. Yes, it was very important. He was, he said, Mr. Hale, a lawyer. His companion was Mr. Curtis, a client.

Ann Domney gave a sharp look at Cecil, asleep on the couch, then went in search of her husband. As soon as she was out of sight the attorney opened his brief-case, while the other man began rubbing his thin fingers through Cecil's silky fur. The men conversed in a whisper.

Cecil sleepily opened one eye, then closed it again to continue his dream of a warehouse full of luscious red salmon. This was an exceptionally good dream. The warehouse was next door to a creamery where thousand of bottles of certified milk came down a runway to join the cans of red salmon.

"Domney will be a sucker for this offer," said Attorney Hale. "Remember now, as a private buyer, you're to offer him five thousand dollars for his building and lot. With Domney thinking the company wants to build in East Lakeland this offer will tickle him pink."

"Red," corrected Cecil, drowsily.

"Humph, what was that?" cried the attorney. He looked around, but there was no one else in the room. He laughed shortly, patted his companion on the shoulder. "Sure. He'll be red all right—red in the face!"

Curtis gave the lawyer a funny look. He shrugged. Whispering, he said, "If Domney knew we had the adjoining and surrounding property tied up he could hold out for thirty thousand and get it."

"Sure thing." Hale laughed again. "But that five thousand cash you have on you will do the trick."

WHEN Domney hurried into the room the attorney was apparently interested only in the books in the case. He looked up, shook hands with Domney.

"I'm Anthony Hale from Cedar Grove, and this is Mr. Curtis who is interested in acquiring a place in Lakeland."

Mr. Domney shook hands eagerly. He picked Cecil up off the couch and set him on the floor. With the toe of his shoe he edged him toward the door. Cecil slipped aside and retired haughtily to the footstool where he sat and watched with unblinking eyes. Mr. Domney saw a ray of hope in the men's visit.

"Then the resort people still are interested in my place?" he asked. "Is that it?"

"No," said Mr. Hale.

Cecil blinked. He turned and walked scornfully from the room.

"No," repeated the attorney. "But Mr. Curtis is one man who is glad that the resort people are confining their operations on the other side of town. He wants something quiet—like Lakeland will be. He's interested in your property."

Apparently to get his victim's mind off the resort company he moved back to the bookcase. "By the way, Domney, I see you have an unusual book here." He pointed to a large vellum

book bound with straps. "I'm a bibliophile, and this book entrances me. Is it for sale?"

Domney straightened his glasses, took the book in his hand. "*Felis Domestica Vagari*, by Phineas de Piedra, the Mystic," he read. "I didn't really mean to bring this one home with me. I don't go in much for magic." He raised his eyebrows as he stared at the title. "Strange about this book. I just happened to buy it about a month ago in a lot from a traveling book scout. If you care for the book, it is yours."

Mr. Hale was genuinely delighted. "Why, thanks," he cried. He took the book and placed it on the table close to his brief-case so he wouldn't forget it.

Domney offered the men chairs. "About this deal—" he began.

Mr. Curtis shared a glance with the attorney, then cleared his throat.

"There's nothing much to discuss. I've already looked over your property and the location *as is* is all right. I'm prepared to offer you what I can get other property for—five thousand dollars." He dug into his wallet for a slip of paper. Five one-thousand-dollar bills came into view.

Domney stared at the money. He tried to smile. "But that's less than I paid for the property twenty years ago. I couldn't think of such a deal."

Mr. Hale cut in. "Mr. Domney, don't think of Lakeland as of twenty years ago, nor of today. Think what it will be a year from now. Under the circumstances I think five thousand dollars is a fair price."

Domney steeled himself, began to argue the merits of the location. His arguments turned into a speech. As before the Rotary Club.

"And, gentlemen," he ended. "I have a great undying faith in our city. Our fathers, our grandfathers—"

He stopped in midair. Cecil had returned to the room and was watching him. Domney was startled by the look

Cecil was giving him. It was something akin to admiration. Domney felt suddenly pleased with himself.

"Yes," he went on, fervently. "our grandfathers left us this heritage—to live in this unspoiled community. Why, in cities of far less qualifications, a lot such as mine would sell for—for twenty thousand dollars!"

"Please, please, Mr. Domney," interrupted Hale again. "We are getting a little off the subject." He looked at his client and nodded his head as if absently.

Mr. Curtis' eyes became a little hard. "I'll pay seventy-five hundred," he said.

DOMNEY appeared not to believe his ears. He looked triumphantly toward Cecil. Then his heart dropped. Cecil looked displeased.

Not only was Cecil displeased, but he was moving past Domney toward the dining-room door. Domney's eyes dilated as he watched Cecil move past. Cecil was talking from the side of his mouth!

Domney looked helplessly at Mr. Curtis and Mr. Hale. "Just a minute," he mumbled. "I'll be right back." He hurried out of the room in Cecil's wake.

When he returned a few minutes later he saw that the attorney had the papers spread out on the desk ready to sign. A deed with the correct legal description was ready for Domney's signature. There was even a notary's seal half-way out of its leather case.

"Gentlemen," said Domney hurriedly. "I'm afraid there's been a mistake. But don't worry, I won't take advantage of you. I know now it isn't my house here you want to buy."

Mr. Hale started. "No," he said, "no, of course not! We're dealing on your property down town. The store lot."

Domney faltered, looking toward Cecil in the doorway. Half-closing his

(Continued on page 97)

*Was the professor a
prophet or a demon?*



CLOCKWORK

By **LESLIE BIGELOW**

OF COURSE everybody remembers last June. For June, 1968 is a central date in the human tale; a date, in fact, like December 2, 1942, when before physicists whose eyes widened with glee, then narrowed with surmise, the uranium pile chain-reacted beneath Stagg Stadium at Chicago.

At 11:33 p. m. Greenwich time. June 22, 1968, the first earth rocket gained the moon, furrowing Tycho Brahe's crater. Because that rocket car-

ried instruments (including several extremely quaint ones, smuggled onto the rocket) the moon was scrutinized by telescope, canvassed by radar, and of course inspected by a brigade of amateurs on every housetop.

Therefore, on the night of June 24 perhaps several hundred thousand of us witnessed an effect contradictorily described and unconvincingly explained. At 12:22 the moon shimmered to a gossamer disc, almost as though it were our moon no longer, but in-

stead an imminent moon; a moon about to be born; a moon wanly peering through a hole where the moon had been. Because it resumed its normal aspect within five minutes, the astronomers could not check certain disturbing computations of weight. But the Mount Palomar spokesman said, "I tell you, the moon had *negative* density."

On the night of June 26, the moon bulged like a toy balloon, as though puffed out by some interstellar pranks-ter, then at once shrank back to normal.

By now, of course, our playful satellite had extorted headlines of a size reserved for the Last Judgment, while our backyards pulsed with embryo Keplers, so that the phenomenon of June 30 was witnessed by half the world. On that night, after blurring for an instant, at 1:16 the moon lost all familiar landmarks. Gone the dead sea hollows; gone the cindery mountains and the drifted ash; gone, all gone.

The *Chicago Tribune* declared: Other Side of Moon Visible at Last. And the comment was as sound as any of the *Tribune's*. The properties of the moon were unchanged. But this moon, this literally new moon, was smooth. The Man in the Moon had gone somewhere a-journeing. And so far as we know now, he has gone for good.

Well! My friend Griffenhoek likes to insist that history is at best a thin gruel: forlorn nubbins of fact blobbing in a sea of conjecture. Suppose we set another nubbing afloat in that conjectural sea. For what really happened during that June of 1968 can be related. But let us implore our diverse gods that only Griffenhoek may ever explain precisely how it happened.

IT WAS one of our friendly sessions of disdain and insult: Noah Griffenhoek, professor of physics, and myself, Patrick Lanson, professor of English—a strange alliance, surely, "Mathematics!" I snorted, resuming our

noisy quarrel. "Systematic jabberwocky!"

Griffenhoek smiled at me over the chess table in his office, where we sneak games between classes at the university. I like to tease him to his noble roaring, so, "Mathematics! Why, take any group of objects and certainly you can weave a tissue of numbers around them. Some web of relationship. So far that's all you prancing mathematicians have ever done with the world. But then you erroneously argue that those numbers of yours correspond with reality. Correspond with reality! Fantods and tarradiddles!"

But Griffenhoek merely smiled.

"Very well," I said. "Consider the number 1 or the number 7. Just *why* they correspond with reality, only Pythagoras could say. But they do—some-what. At least, you can have two wives or seven hours. But what about negative numbers? Oh," I went on with what I hoped was maddening condescension, "Oh, I suppose negative numbers are 'real' too. A negative 7 might be seven hours you can't get."

Good! His fingers pattered; his neck distended. So I proceeded, "But now I have you, Griff. What about imaginary numbers? What do *they* correspond to? What about the square root of minus one? What does *that* match in the real world?"

With an effort, Griffenhoek still smiled.

"Charlatan!" I sneered. "Impostor! Show me what a surd corresponds to in the real world and I'll believe you. But until you do that, your mathematics is the kindergarten trifling of deluded theorists. It's—"

At last! Griffenhoek shoved the board from beneath the chessmen. He demanded, "You will be at home this afternoon, I trust?"

"Certainly. Even to a mathematician!"

In a carefully controlled voice he said, "This afternoon, then. But you will not like it." Then he launched

his ultimate insult. "No, *professor of English*, you will not like it at all."

PROFESSIONAL skill aside, Griffenhoek is that capital fellow, the old time master craftsman, cranky and exacting: the sort of man who peers at you over steel-rimmed spectacles in a job print shop; or mends watches in a small southern town and invents his own escapements; or like Cerberus guards the precision toolroom in a machine shop. Usually a Debs socialist, an agnostic, a bachelor, argumentative and whiskered. The species, alas, nears extinction, along with great stylists, imperial philosophers, and honest men.

Another tiresome eccentric? Well, God bless eccentrics, for it is the eccentric, the sport, who, seeing things at an odd angle, sometimes really sees them. If Riemann had not devised the non-Euclidean geometry required by Einstein's theory, could that geometry ever have been devised by some snuffling pedant? Or as Einstein himself declared, if Gauss had not invented some of his equations, what reason is there to suppose that anybody would ever have invented them?

Yet Griffenhoek's professional rank is lofty. Certainly his monograph on the 24-dimensional universe of the electron is already a classic.

As I waited for him in my trailer, simmering on the Arizona desert, I mused on the problem I had set him. The problem had vexed me for years; I had consulted academic mathematicians in vain. It is easy to understand—vaguely—what a 1 or a 2 is. Vaguely, because there are riddles in Number, just as there are riddles everywhere. But there's a vexing aspect of the imaginary numbers. Exactly what in our world of "reality" corresponds to $\sqrt{-1}$ or i in the same way that a single elm loosely corresponds to the number 1? Nothing, so far as I can see; nothing at all. Yet by the use of $\sqrt{-1}$ bridges and dams are built,

the air-foil of a plane is created, electricity is manipulated, and one day soon Mars will be reached.

The surd i is a thing unreal, yet usable; imaginary, yet operative. It is, in fact, a good deal like a thought, which is itself immaterial yet which penetrates the world. Was it Jeans who said that the world itself reminded him of nothing so much as a thought in the mind of God?

A plume of dust. The old snorting Lincoln. And Griffenhoek in a seer-sucker suit, ancient panama, carrying a large red morocco case. His mustache, I was glad to note, still twitched in feigned wrath.

To nag him further, I began at once. "Mathematics! Pooh! Consider, Griff: we have a mind of a certain limited kind, which perceives the universe in a certain limited way. Very well. In our mind we perceive certain relationships which we call mathematical. Then we slap those relationships on the universe and say *eureka!* the universe is just like our minds. What impudence!"

But Griffenhoek only sighed. Outside in the sun the thermometer stood at 147. Then he mustered strength enough to growl. "Professor of English! Comma counter! Trohee trifier!"

He wiped away the waterfall of sweat from his bald head. Then, fumbling with the awkward clasps of the morocco case, he said, seriously, "According to Pythagoras, numbers are eternal things, the final realities of a misty world. Plato concurs: to him numbers are among those essences, those ultimates, which alone are real." His words rang like a motto prefacing some noble volume; we both became grave at once.

Now the case lay open.

"Oh, magnificent!"

Pleasedly, "You really think so?"

"You know I mean it. Superb!"

For here in the morocco case were artifacts whose purpose I could scarcely guess, but exquisite, like so many

lost triumphs from the workshop of Archimedes. A four inch cube with two sides slotted. A track like the track of a toy train, but a mere quarter-inch in gauge, finished like a Cellini masterwork. Flat hieroglyphs, enameled and chased—numbers and esoteric symbols.

FOR a moment I merely gazed and gazed, while Griffenhoek still panted a little and mopped away the renewed waterfall from his head. Oh, we are shrewd little fellows nowadays, whacking away like little men. But no longer can we cut intaglios as the Romans did; no longer engrave steel, as the eighteenth century did; for that matter no longer even draw animals as the Cro-Magnons drew them upon the cave walls of Périgord, twenty thousand years ago. Certainly we cannot match the clockwork ingenuities of our ancestors.

For instance: four tiny porcelain figures in perukes and lace cuffs, green coats and rose-satin small clothes. *Tick-tick-tick-tick*. The tiny figures raise tiny bows. Upon tiny violins and cellos the porcelain figurines play a quartet of Mozart. And this is no music box. With tiny bows upon tiny instruments they play the quartet; they play it well!

Or a golden birdcage, an inch through. Two jeweled parakeets upon a silver perch. They sidle, grasping the perch with ruby claws. They fluff their throats and twitter. *Tick-tick-tick-tick*.

Or those astonishing Easter eggs made annually for the Czars of Russia. Or the brazen image of Albertus Magnus, endowed with articulate speech. Or chess players, like Moxon's master; or pianists and swordsmen, some of them never really explained.

Or the figures in Griffenhoek's morocco case. For these seemed to be clockwork figures, for a purpose I could not fathom. "Magnificent. And . . . ?"

Griffenhoek chuckled. "You are like

Lord Kelvin. You can't understand a thing unless you see a model of it."

He set the cube upon the trailer linoleum, dainty, superb. Mortising sections of the tiny track, he passed it through the slots of the cube, like a child's railway line passing through a toy tunnel. Then, having wiped his hands carefully, he drew out a flat enameled symbol, a figure 2 with tiny wheels in its base. The wheels fitted on the little track.

Of course I itched to learn about the beautiful toys, yet somehow their very beauty suppressed curiosity, or made curiosity become vulgar. And it occurred to me again how old it is: ours is an age hostile to beauty of finish, whether in manners, language or ethics. Yet this same rude age depends utterly upon science, which is staggering in its finesse of equation and laboratory contrivance. Like most ages, then, our own age disdains the very quality which supports it; and employs television, for example, to publish a prevailing crudity which in time will make even television impossible.

I seemed to hear Copernicus talking of his own theory like an enamored poet, speaking of "a wonderful symmetry," while Kepler adds, "I contemplate its beauty with incredible and ravishing delight. . . ."

But Griffenhoek was saying, "First, suppose we perform a simple operation. Our single cube represents the number 1. Now, we multiply."

He released the figure 2. *Tick-tick-tick-tick*. With the dainty obbligato of a fine watch, the figure 2 ticked into the cube. A delicate chirring. Sauntering like a Restoration jackdandy, the figure emerged, while the cube blurred. *Tick-tick-tick-tick*. And now there were two cubes, one upon the other.

What could I say?

"Now we divide." Once more the 2 minced toward the cube, into it, out. The cubes blurred. Now there was the single cube again.

"And now we divide again." Once more the 2 entered the cube, emerged. And now there was a smaller cube, half the volume of the original.

"Good lord, Griff!"

With a prestidigitator's air, Griffenhock drew out a negative 2. "Now we multiply again." For several minutes he performed these simple operations. He enjoyed himself. Why not? His manner was elaborate and rehearsed. Penetrated by the negative two, the cube shimmered into transparency, as though it were a cube no longer, but a cube about to be born. It seemed to claim its own position in space, yet at the same time to withdraw from that space, as if pushed through, existing on reality's other side in a form of which the transparency was a symbolic ghost. *Tick-tick-tick-tick.*

Clockwork?

HERE in the Arizona desert, near the devil's road, the *Camino Del Diablo*, among the sullen buttes, sentinelled by giant Saguaro cacti, in a trailer cooled by a humming box—there the exquisite toys marked and countermarched.

At last Griffenhock chuckled. "Now! I seem to remember that you were troubled by the square root of minus one?"

"Well, damn it all, Griff. Minus one has no square root. How in the devil can you take a square root which can't be taken? What is the square root of minus one, anyhow? Oh, of course, you mathematicians pretend to take it, just by putting the sign of the radical over minus one. But what then?"

Griffenhock chuckled again. From his morocco case he withdrew a model surd, $\sqrt{1}$. He engaged its wheels upon the tiny track. "Multiply?"

The surd minced toward the cube, into it, out. *Tick-tick-tick-tick.*

And now the cube was shivered. Now it, too, was a model surd, $\sqrt{-1}$. Yet, with all the cube's material drawn

into the slender lines of the surd, there seemed to be no cogs, no gears.

"But how on earth! And anyhow, this is just another surd. What is the thing that *this* thing symbolizes?"

Griffenhock smiled. He restored his cube to its original form. "And now, Lanson, now we divide. On paper we merely make a fraction of it, placing the one over the surd. But observe."

The surd entered the cube with the elegance of a Venetian macaroni, through it, out. *Tick-tick-tick-tick.* A blur of movement. It was like a man hastily stripping off his coat, leaving the sleeves pulled inward by his hurry. The blur resolved. The cube was *inside out*.

"Good God, Griff!"

Now he played with his toys; restored the cube; doubled it; caused it to waver, a gossamer cube; restored it again. Outside, the sun hammered and a hairy scorpion scuttled for shade beneath an ironwood root. Inside...

"Magnificent toys, Griff."

"Toys?"

"Beautiful toys, but..."

"Toys?"

"Well, clockwork, aren't they?"

"Clockwork?"

With his morocco case Griffenhock marched out the trailer door onto the Arizona desert. My trailer's parked on a twenty-five cent acre of land, six miles from town. A friend drilled my well; the power line is tapped for lights and the air-conditioner. An odd way to live? Consider how rare are quiet and peace.

Twenty feet from the door squats a little boulder, glittering with mica.

"Watch." Already the sun had drawn its waterfall down his face.

He rolled the little boulder onto a silvery sheet. Then he seemed to aim his tiny track directly at the boulder. Under the savage sun his eyes were socketed in deep shadow; he looked like a prophet in some dreadful valley of the East.

Then, in a froth and blur, the

boulder was made gossamer, was doubled, was turned inside out. Griffenhoek played with it as a candy-maker plays with a twist of soft taffy.

Clockwork?

"How shall I leave your little rock, Lanson? Doubled? Transparent?"

"For God's sake, leave it as it was."

"Ah, you love your ugly little rock, perhaps?"

"A damned ugly rock, but I was used to it."

Withdrawing the silvery sheet he said, "You may thank your gods for this, Lanson."

"I do."

BACK in the trailer again. Griffenhoek patted his morocco case. "You know, perhaps I ought to destroy these."

"Destroy? You couldn't, Griff. Could you destroy the cathedral of Chartres or burn up every copy of Shakespeare?"

Then he grew immensely serious. "I know what I'd like to do with them."

I waited, gazing at the desert.

Griffenhoek said, "Oh, they think I'm a crackpot; quaint old dodderer. And what do you suppose I think of them?"

He still resembled an angry prophet. "I do not like them, Lanson. I do not much like this world of ours, any more: imbeciles screeching the word 'progress' in a world dedicated to a swinish mediocrity; politicians who live by taking in each other's whitewashing; aimless decadents gawking through a career of chomping popcorn at idiot movies or honking from nowhere to nowhere in a fetor of gasoline and burnt rubber."

I had to grin. "A mad world, my masters. But that was said centuries ago."

Griffenhoek chuckled at his own rhetoric, then burst out passionately. "What a foul paradox, Lanson! Science is a pure quest; true science is the immaculate exercise of reason in

behalf of fact. Because it is pure, it is successful. And being successful, it is preyed upon, its technology subverted to a dirty multiplication of gadgets, toys for cretins, chrome-plate for the Chambers of Commerce. Thus baboonery, scratching its fleas, beslimes the intellect!

"Damn this world, Lanson, and damn all the whey-faced ninnies in it."

A sheepish smile. A tired grin. His mood wore out. But then he grew serious again. "I mean it, Lanson. Damn this world. Or—most of it."

I glanced at the morocco case. "Well?"

"Oh, I shall be fair. First of all there shall be a warning given."

"Eh?"

"A *mene mene tekel upharsin* legible in the very skies. In any case," he added, "next month I am required to join the rocket laboratory at Desindio. Perhaps they will permit me to make pretty little toys for the commanding general's brats."

He chuckled; the wrath was gone. Almost dreamily he said, "Of course the rocket will carry instruments. . . ." Then he said, firmly, "But first a warning."

I wasn't sure in what spirit to answer.

GRIFFENHOEK wrote me once, a letter smuggled past the Desindio censorship and mailed from Santa Fe. It was good to hear him snort again: "Waste! I thought I'd seen waste among federal malingerers in bureau offices, but. . ." Or "What a crew! Goggle-eyed ranters who think electrons are pink, or maybe octahedral, or maybe shaped like a baby unicorn!" Or "The army! They insist on quartering me with officers, some of whom can read and write."

Underneath the invective, though, I sensed a satisfaction with progress. And then, . . . June, 1968.

(Continued on page 98)

THE ARBITER

BY JOHN RUSSELL FEARN

The thing was of metal—but it walked and thought like a man, and was a grim object of deadly peril and menace!

THE year of 2016—and peace...

The wreckage of past ages of barbarism had been cleared away. All over the Earth stood flawless cities. The peoples had nothing to complain of. They lived in a tempered, happy world of smoothly working machines and vast foolproof control panels. But in this there perhaps lay the seeds of danger.

Selby Doyle, President of the Earth, voted into office by common consent, was a shrewd man. Slim, wiry, with gray hair swept back from an expansive brow, there was little to stamp him as extraordinary, unless it was the resolute tightness of his lips or the squareness of his chin. Here was a man who reasoned, decided, and then acted.

He had accomplished all that he had set out to do and molded the world afresh. It gave him pleasure to sit as he was now, in the dim half light of the lowering night, his chair tilted back on its hind legs, his gray eyes gazing on the lights of Major City as they sprang automatically into being at the scheduled times. The lower lights first, then the higher ones, as the tide of day ebbed from the deeper walks.

Presently he glanced round as the warning light on his great desk proclaimed somebody's approach. Instantly he was the chief magistrate—self-possessed, ready for his visitor. He closed the switches which filled the room with an intense yet restful brilliance.

The automatic door opened. Doyle sat looking at the tall man who crossed

the threshold. Vincent Carfax, chairman of the Committee for Public Welfare, inclined his bald head in greeting.

"Your excellency!" he acknowledged, and stepped forward to shake hands.

Doyle waved him to a chair. Carfax was an inhuman index of a man who carried endless statistics in his agile brain. Poker-faced, emaciated as a skeleton, it was his proud boast that he had never been known to smile.

"You will overlook the lateness of the hour, Mr. President?" he asked at length, in his precise voice.

"I was about to leave," Doyle answered. "However, only an important matter could bring you here, Carfax. What is it?"

"Unrest."

"Unrest?" President Doyle raised his eyebrows. "Unrest in Major City? My dear fellow!"

"Unrest!" Carfax insisted. "I have suspected it for a long time, but I've refrained from bringing it to your notice until I was absolutely certain. Now I have conclusive evidence. Major City is resting on quicksand, your excellency."

DOYLE pondered for a moment. "Tell me about it," he invited.

"The facts are plain," Carfax answered slowly. "The reaction of perfect security after many years spent in wars and struggle is going directly against the adaptive strain Nature builds up. I have had the First in Biology check on that. The human body and mind, keyed to every emergency, had until recently something it could grapple with. Now

there is nothing but perfection. The mind has of necessity to find a new form of excitation in order to maintain its equilibrium. Do I make it clear?"

"I provided science for the people," President Doyle said quietly. "Is not that exciting enough?"

"Science, sir, is for the chosen few. Men such as you and I, and all the other master-brains who have brought this sublime state into being, are different. Call them geniuses if you will. At least they do not represent the masses. I have been forced to the unpleasant realization that very few minds are adapted to scientific study. Just as in the pre-Wars Era a man accepted the electric light for what it is without involving himself in the electronic processes embodied in it, so today there is that same aspect of laziness and torpor—and there, Mr. President, lie the seeds of unrest and mischief."

Doyle smiled. "It can be stopped. The Congress has the power."

"This goes deeper than you realize," Carfax said, shaking his bald head. "It is not confined to Major City. It exists nearly everywhere. So much so I felt it my duty to warn you. If this unrest is not quelled it means—back to war!"

The Chief Executive was silent.

"There is a way," Carfax said.

"There is?"

"It is becoming increasingly clear that the Last War did not entirely kill the belief in men's minds that force of arms is the only sure way to Right. The element of unrest now present will grow rapidly. At the moment it takes the form of vicious words. It would like to build up a barrier against all things scientific and tear down the perfect structure we have created. But I say—if I may—that the close of the Last War really did end war for ever!"

"Perhaps." The President smiled grayly.

"Listen," Carfax resumed, tapping his finger emphatically on the desk. "We must forever outlaw war as a disease. Until now Man has not had sufficient power at his disposal—scientific power that is—to make his dreams come true. The earlier men tried it with pacts, treaties, and leagues of nations—and they all came to grief—because there was no science back of them."

"And now?"

"Now, with tremendous scientific resources at our command, we can make a stand against this eternal enemy of progress, destroy it while it is still young." Carfax hesitated briefly and looked apologetic. "What I am about to say, your Excellency, may make it appear I am teaching you your business. You will forgive that?"

Doyle shrugged. "Only a fool refuses to learn. Continue."

"Many years ago men adopted the principle of arbitration," Carfax resumed. "They were enlightened enough, in civil matters at least, to place any matter of dispute, particularly in instances of capital and labor, before a council usually composed of three experts. That council was vested with complete power to say "Yes" or "No" upon the point at issue. Thus matters were arbitrated. Endeavors were made, futilely enough, to devise an arbitration scheme between nations.

"The principle of arbitration relied on the good faith of nations to seek arbitration, but lost in a welter of power politics and overcome with greed, backed by terrific man power and armaments, wars followed wars. Arbitration was ignored. But, sir, the idea was not lost. Why cannot a new arbiter arise? Not a man, not three men—but twelve! In olden times a jury was usually composed of twelve men and women. So in respect to that judicial tradition let it still be twelve. Twelve—to arbitrate!"

President Doyle sighed a little. "An excellent idea, old friend. But what twelve men or women, however competent, would be accepted by the masses as sole judges?"

"There comes the difference!" the Statistician said calmly. "I have been investigating on my own account. Ever since this unrest began I have pondered the idea of an Arbiter. I have interviewed, at great length, twelve men, each one of them equipped with the finest brain in the world for his particular sphere. The twelve major sciences of present day civilization can each have a master at the head. Yes, I have talked with them. Each one of them has foreseen as we have the grim fate that awaits mankind if unrest is

allowed to prevail. Now I have their assurance, once the word is made lawful by you, that each one of them is prepared to sacrifice his life for the particular science he controls in order that the future of mankind may be assured."

DOYLE sat bolt upright. "Sacrifice his life!" he cried. "What on earth do you mean, man? Why should they?"

"Because there can be no other way to make a true Arbiter!"

The President got to his feet, stood by the window with his hands clasped behind him.

"Go on," he said, lost in thought.

"Twelve brains will be pooled for the common good," Carfax explained. "Twelve brains will work in unison to provide a common answer, and a just one, for every conceivable difficulty in every walk of life. Twelve brains, functioning as one unit, will be the judge of humanity's future actions and set discord at naught."

"Even brains die," President Doyle pointed out, turning. "It is only putting off the vital issue for a short period. When the brains die the old trouble will be back. This is just—just a temporary panacea, making things comfortable for the present age. What of posterity, Carfax? This is the problem."

"The brains will never die!" the Statistician said, and at Doyle's look of astonishment he was tempted to smile. But remembering his one boast he didn't.

"I said we could outlaw unrest and war forever, Mr. President. This is no hasty plan. I have conferred with Gascoyne, the First in Anatomy. He says the plan I have devised is feasible. Did it ever occur to you what a poor instrument the brain is for the interpretation of thought?"

"Often. What of it?"

"Gascoyne has asked himself that question long enough to find an answer. We of this age know science agrees that thought is everywhere, that it is expressed in greater or lesser degree according to the quality of the 'receiver' or brain interpreting it. According to Gascoyne a brain is basically an electric machine—a radio receiver, if you

wish it. In proportion to its quality it absorbs and uses the ideas of all-perceiving mind and expresses ideas clearly or badly through the medium of a physical body, which in itself is an expression of mind-force."

Doyle was clearly interested now. A faint, unaccustomed flush of pleasure stole into Carfax's pallid cheeks.

"Since, then, mind contains the quintessence of every known science," he went on, "certain brains—or receivers—are better fitted than others, and can be completely duplicated in a mechanical, imperishable mould! Every convolution of a brain, every neuron, every synaptic resistance, can be imitated just as surely as in old days an impression could be taken of a man's gums for the fitting of false dentures. It can be done just as surely as the artificial leg of today has false muscles."

President Doyle came back to the desk and stood waiting.

"With your sanction," Carfax finished slowly, "I propose to model twelve synthetic, imperishable brains on the exact convolutions and measurements belonging to these twelve scientists. It will be done in the fashion of taking a death-mask. The image of the face at death remains in the mask forever. In this case the mechanical brains will be modeled over the real ones, duplicating them in every detail. When this has been done, the mechanical equivalent will take over from the natural organ, probably with even better results because it will be devoid of the inevitable clogging of human construction. The real brain will shrivel and die afterwards, leaving the mechanical image."

"Once the operation is complete these mechanical brains will be linked together, will go on gaining knowledge with a speed compatible with that of an ordinary brain if it were permitted to live for eternity. That is how the Arbiter will become indestructable and a paragon of justice for all mankind."

Doyle thought, then shook his head.

"Even though I am the elected executive of all Earth, Carfax, I am still human. Twelve men to die if I give the word—it is unthinkable!"

The Statistician got to his feet, his pale face adamant.

"As the Chief Magistrate, Doyle, you

have, to a certain extent, to be devoid of emotion. You spoke of posterity. Posterity can be assured by your word—now. And remember, the twelve will give their lives voluntarily. Think of the thousands of scientists in the past who have given their lives willingly for a less cause."

"But the decision to slay twelve did not rest with one man," President Doyle pointed out. Then he turned impatiently. "Carfax, don't misunderstand me. I see the value of your idea. I appreciate the great lengths you must have been to, to get the plan worked, but it would be better if the decision did not rest so completely with me!"

CARFAX shrugged. "The facts are plain enough," he said quietly. "The personal brain power of the twelve best men will be pooled. Twelve will die, in order that thousands to come may live in peace!"

After a brief silence Doyle began to hedge with vague desperation. He drummed his fingers on the desk. There was an inhuman persuasion in Carfax's cold, emotionless voice.

"What guarantee have we that opposing factions will consult the Arbiter?"

"We have the guarantee of twelve imperishable brains in a mobile machine—a machine controlled by thought waves reacting on special mechanisms. In the event of two opposing factions, the Arbiter will cut off all possible means that might lead to force between the parties concerned. Compulsory arbitration will come into being. It's that—or decay!"

"It is ruling by force," Doyle muttered. "Our present method is by votes."

"It is common sense! All other scientists are strongly in favor of the plan. I convinced them of its value. That leaves only your sanction."

"Not immediately, my friend. I must think." The President pressed a hand to his forehead. "Leave me for a while. I must talk with Gascoyne first. I'll acquaint you with my decision later."

As something apart he heard the soft click of the door as Carfax went. . .

Even after he had heard Rolf Gascoyne's fully detailed surgical description of the idea of the Arbiter, it took President Doyle several more days of

deliberation before he finally gave his consent to the project. And he did it then only when he was assured of the willingness of the twelve men concerned to sacrifice themselves in order that posterity might have an assured peace.

So he gave the order—and with the twelve men and Gascoyne he shut himself away from city affairs for a while in the surgical laboratories.

He answered no calls except those which demanded his personal attention, leaving everything else to Carfax, his deputy.

From then on Doyle watched activity in a field which was unfamiliar to him. He saw the twelve human beings go willingly under the anaesthetic. He saw the brains, still living, being fed by synthetic bloodstream and artificial heart. Then, under orders from Gascoyne, the first brain was duly imprisoned within a soft mould of ductile metal.

Atom by atom, molecule by molecule, under the control of instruments so sensitive that light-vibration disturbed them, metallic moulds were set up, fitted into place by slender rods of force timed to a split thousandth of a second, the slightest error in which would have meant utter failure.

But there was no error. Gascoyne saw to that. He was coldly efficient, intolerant of mistakes. The controlling forces made no slip. They had no human qualities in them to err.

Day after day the scientists worked on. From time to time Doyle received disquieting reports from Carfax concerning the rapid increase of unrest amongst the unscientific populace. He handed the information on to Gascoyne who promptly made a speed-up all round.

In a month the first brain was complete. The dried shell of the dead brain was removed and the mechanical counterpart, deadly precise in its way of reasoning, came into being. The actual entity of Unwin Slater, First in Mathematics, had vanished and given place to the computations of Brain Unit No. 1.

Thereafter it was not difficult. Assured now of success in the operation, Doyle felt a little more easy in mind—and the experts worked steadily on.

Brain after brain was linked up, until at the end of three months the transference was complete. The knowledge of each was unified to the other by delicate vibratory wires, and thence carried back to a central brain pan—in truth a contrivance of machinery of profound complexity, reactive only to the thoughts of twelve combined brains.

Gascoyne had been clever here. Without twelve brains in unity the machinery would not function, and since this seat of all motivation and pooled knowledge was protected by metals of interlocking atoms, the Arbiter was absolutely foolproof. In fact, the more the atoms of the housing metal continued to disorganize, the more impossible it would be to break down.

ON OCTOBER 9, 1916, the Arbiter became visible in public for the first time. In appearance it resembled a great circle of metal about fifty feet wide, studded at regular intervals round the edge with unbreakable domes which sheathed the metallic brains inside. The wires, protected by similar armor, led directly to the circle's center wherein stood the governing machine-unit. For locomotion the thing possessed skillfully jointed metal legs, perfectly balancing the circle of metal they carried. In many ways the Arbiter resembled an enormous wheel studded with twelve nodules and supplied with feet.

In response to public demand, after Doyle's initial introduction of it and outline of its purpose, it gave a brief speech, world-relayed. Its thought waves, passing into photoelectric devices, which in turn forced air through replicas of human vocal cords, produced a voice that was completely impartial and yet arresting.

"People of the world, you are asked to forget that this contrivance is the carrier of twelve brains," the great machine said. "It is a unity, a single unity with a twelve-fold purpose. That purpose is peace on earth and goodwill towards men. To that end I, the Arbiter, will work. Let any man or woman who thinks of transgressing the peace pause now and think! The Arbiter stands ready!"

Thereafter the Arbiter was allowed

complete liberty. It was entirely self-contained, sleepless. It moved as it chose, but usually stayed pretty close to Major City.

Its first decisive action was to subdue to a considerable extent the activities of the restive ones. With an uncanny sense of deduction it unearthed a plot whereby a thousand unscientific insurgents were plotting to seize a territory between Major City and its nearest neighbor one hundred miles away. The insurgents had hoped to establish a colony for themselves. Had they succeeded they would undoubtedly have been the first to break the unity of a great world-wide nation in which all class distinction and creed had been leveled into one brotherhood.

But the Arbiter sifted the rebels' plans from top to bottom, and since in this case there was no question of arbitration between parties the mechanical judge took the next most effective step.

One by one the entire thousand met death, ruthlessly, inexplicably—but certainly. The scientists became a little worried. That the first act of the Arbiter should be to slay without question was something of a shock.

If it did nothing else, the action at least quelled all the other restive spirits. They turned in increasing numbers to scientific study.

Thereafter, for a year, the Arbiter had little of importance to do. It sorted out minor disputes with calm, emotionless words and its decision was implicitly obeyed. President Selby Doyle felt satisfied. His first fears had vanished. The Arbiter was a panacea after all. Then came the affair of Grenson, the physicist.

Grenson, a young and ardent man of the New Era, was sure that he had discovered the real meaning of an electron's wave and particle motion. Working alone in his laboratory he knew that he was on the verge of probing the long sought for secret of power from the atom.

Immediately, he went to the President, stood at the desk and looked for the first time upon the quiet, calm personage who ruled the world.

"Sit down, young man," Doyle invited at last, eying his visitor steadily and

inwardly deciding that he liked him. "Sit down and give me the full details."

Grenson gathered his courage. President Doyle snapped a recording switch then he sat back to listen to the rush of eager, excited phrases. For fifteen minutes Grenson held forth on the possibilities of his invention, still theoretical, and through it all the Chief Executive sat in silence, linking up the points in his keen mind, fitting together postulation with postulation.

At last Grenson became silent, flushed with his own energies.

Doyle gave him an encouraging smile. "In theory, young man, I should say your scheme is feasible. If so, you may be sure that Major City will fully reward you. But first we must have advice in this very specialized field," He pressed the switch of his intercom. "Send in the First in Physics," he ordered.

FOR ten minutes President and worker sat in silence, the young man looking round the great office and Doyle busy at his desk. Then Horley Dodd, the First in Physics, arrived—a sharp-nosed, scrub-headed man with thick-lensed eyeglasses.

"You want me, sir?" His tone was by no means pleasant.

"Yes, Dodd, I do. This young man here, if his theory is as good as it sounds, has the secret of atomic power. Just listen to the playback of his exposition."

President Doyle flicked a button. There was silence as Grenson's eager voice came forth from the audiograph. The First in Physics stood with his hands locked behind him, biting his lower lip and staring up at the ceiling. The voice ceased at last. An automatic switch started the sound track ribbon reeling back to the start again.

"Well?" the President asked, leaning back in his chair.

"Frankly, I'd say it's impossible!" Dodd said briefly. "It is at best a mere theory, and as such does not advance us one iota beyond what we already know."

"That is a very narrow viewpoint," the President observed.

Dodd's sharp little eyes sparked de-

fiance. "It's the only viewpoint, your Excellency."

"But, sir, I have it all worked out!" Grenson sprang to his feet earnestly. "Naturally, I am a man of only moderate means. I cannot afford the costly apparatus necessary to prove my idea. That is why I brought the scheme to the President. Now you say it's no good."

"You had no right to bring it here!" Dodd snapped.

"He had every right," the President said. "What is more, Dodd, I have neither time nor patience for this unseemly wrangling." He got to his feet decisively. "We have the Arbiter to decide such things for us. Come into the laboratory, both of you."

He preceded the pair to a sealed interdoor and opened it. They passed within to the monster of legs and nodules occupying the center of the floor.

"Arbiter, a question arises," President Doyle stated quietly, stopping before the thing's sensitive pickup. "Is the theory of atomic force about to be given to you practical—or not?" He turned aside and switched on a relay of Grenson's voice-record. Again that silence and Grenson stood with his gaze uncertainly watching the glittering monster that was to determine his life's ideal.

After long thought at the close of the exposition the Arbiter spoke.

"The theory of Grenson is not practicable! The secret of atomic power will never be found because the very nature of the atom makes it impossible. The judgment is awarded to Horley Dodd."

The First in Physics smiled acidly and glanced at the President. Doyle was stroking his chin slowly. Then he turned to the dazed Grenson and patted him gently on the shoulder.

"I am sorry, my boy—I really am. I did feel that you had something, but the Arbiter cannot be wrong. The decision is final."

"Final!" Grenson shouted. "Do you think I am going to take the opinion of a thing like this—this Arbiter? Do you think I shall give up a theory because a few canned brains say so? Not on my life! I'm going on, and on. Yes, I'll make the money somehow to prove my idea."

He swung round, red-faced with anger, and vanished through the doorway. Doyle watched him go, then shrugged.

"You're too sentimental, Mr. President," Dodd said brusquely. "You allow too many of these crack-brained theorists to take advantage of you. He has the wrong idea entirely. What he and his sort need is control, not encouragement."

"As long as I am Chief Magistrate I shall make my own decisions," Doyle answered quietly. "I shall not need to detain you any longer, Dodd. Thank you for coming."

The scientist went out and President Doyle returned slowly into his own office, stood by the desk, thinking. That young man had had a great idea.

It was towards evening when the private wire buzzed. Doyle took up the receiver and Vincent Carfax's lean, cold visage came onto the screen.

"Your Excellency, I understand from my agents that you had a young man to see you today? Chap named Grenson? And that the decision of the Arbiter went against him?"

"Correct."

"He died at five thirty this afternoon! He was slain by mind-force from the Arbiter. I thought it would interest you."

DOYLE stared at the screen fixedly. "You are sure?"

"I never make mistakes," Carfax answered dispassionately. "I don't like it, this continued display of force!"

"No. Neither do I!"

President Doyle cut off, his jaw set with uncommon hardness. He got to his feet and walked into the adjoining laboratory, stood staring at the metal monster. Even as he stood making his survey he could sense the inhuman aura the thing radiated.

"Arbiter, you slew without provocation!" he snapped suddenly. "Why? I demand to know. You told Grenson he was wrong, but what need was there to murder him as well?"

"That question is outside your province. You are the President, yes, but you had me created for the undisputed adjudication of all matters capable of argument, for the carrying out of these

adjudications afterwards. The only way to prevent a continued disobedience of commands is to kill! Grenson, in spite of my decision, was determined to work in spite of me. So he died. So it must always be with those who are defiant. Otherwise, the purpose of the Arbiter is lost."

"But it's barbarism!" President Doyle cried hoarsely. "The very thing I believed you'd stop!"

"I am not answerable to anybody for what I believe or think," the Arbiter answered implacably.

"But suppose young Grenson had been right? Suppose he had touched the verge of unlocking atomic power? Think what it could have meant to us. We need that power. Earth's stores of petroleum, coal, and certain metals cannot last much longer. Supplies were drained to the uttermost in building and equipping the cities. Atomic power would solve many things at one bound. Even the correct transmutation of elements, a secret we desperately need to find. At the least you could have let Grenson go on experimenting."

"Not in face of my decision. I acted as I saw best. So far as I am concerned the matter is finished."

Doyle hesitated, staring at the thing bitterly, then with clenched fists he went slowly from the laboratory. Somewhere, he knew, something was wrong. The treasured plans for security had gone utterly awry.

Very gradually it was forced on the adherents of scientific progress that the Arbiter was anything but what it was intended to be. Science became divided into two camps—the strugglers and the opposers, with Dodd as chief of the opposers.

Dodd, though a scientist, firmly believed in the inaccessibility of Nature's inner secrets, and had neither vision nor tolerance. He was too content to accept science for what it was rather than for what it might become. In that very fact lay the seed of disaster. The camp of Science, divided against itself, began to show signs of decay.

Time and again the Arbiter was called in, and every time the verdict went to Horley Dodd and his party. Baffled, sickened by the obvious breakdown in the scheme for universal

peace, President Selby Doyle's grip on things commenced to weaken. Already worn out with the cares of office, to which had been added crushing disappointment, the illness which preceded his demise was brief.

Officials were present round his death bed—but officials were all they were, men who had served him because it had been their duty to serve. To the dying President there was only one face which represented loyalty and friendship, and it belonged to Carfax.

"Carfax, you must be President," Doyle whispered. "As—as it is my final wish, you will be chosen. All around this bed are the men who will elect you. I have their promise. I think that I have—have been too lenient, but no such emotions will trouble you, Carfax. You are younger. You are an expert scientist. You must defeat this Arbiter, my friend. Find out why it has turned traitor! You promise?"

"I promise," Carfax answered.

President Doyle relaxed and smiled. It was a smile that remained fixed. The President of the Earth was dead.

An hour later the assembled scientists, all of them leaders on the side of the Strugglers, filed into the main office to face their new President. They found Carfax at the great desk, coldly silent. He waited until the group was fully assembled.

"Gentlemen, for seven years now we have been chained hand and foot by an invention of our own making—a metal dictator—and it has betrayed us. We don't know why, yet—but we do know that unless we defy this Arbiter, or find forces which can destroy it, we are a doomed people."

GASCOYNE shook his head. "We cannot destroy it—at least not in the light of present scientific knowledge," he said seriously. "We made the thing of a metal whose atoms interlock, remember. It is sealed forever. We made it foolproof—and to what end?"

"It is in our own hands to determine the end," President Carfax retorted. "Unless we act, we're finished. It is the very law of the Universe that there must be progress. Every day now brings us up against new difficulties. Sources

of power are running low. New sources, intended for us by Nature, are barred because the brains that would develop them are prevented by this twelve-brained monstrosity. I tell you we must defeat it!"

Assured that he might be able to succeed, President Carfax went to work to prove his words. The Strugglers began anew the experiments which had been truncated by the death of Grenson.

They worked to within an ace of solving the secret of atomic power. Carfax himself got far enough to extract a terrific amount of energy from a cube of copper. From incredibly small pieces of highly conductive metal he built up a model power plant which, on a giant scale, would replace the already sadly worn electric equipment from which the cities derived their light and power.

The other scientists explored different realms. Some reasoned out new methods of synthesis by which the fast waning supplies of oil and coal could be replaced. Another was convinced that he had transmutation of metals in his grip, with which the cities could be repaired as time went on. Yet another saw his chance of harnessing the waste energy of the sun.

By degrees, under Carfax's fine leadership, the determined scientists began to lay plans for the foundation of real Utopia.

Then the Arbiter struck! In a public speech it declared that the discoveries claimed by President Vincent Carfax and his colleagues were nothing better than fancy. The Arbiter took sides with the Opposers and launched a small but savagely effective massacre against the Strugglers. In three days of desperate skirmish and slaughter Carfax and his followers were wiped out. Horley Dodd leader of the Opposers, was killed too. Not that it signified much. The Opposers were now in complete control, backed always by the impartial Arbiter.

Languid with victory, the Opposers lazily repaired the damage and then sat back to enjoy the comforts which Vincent Carfax had sworn were coming to an end. Apathy set in, born of lack of anything to accomplish. Even the Arbiter had nothing left to judge. The fi-

nal vanquishment had shown to the Opposers that progress was a form of disease and entirely unnecessary. Better to relax and enjoy the fruits of labor.

The year 2018 passed away and was followed by a gap of somnolent, drifting years until 2030. Nothing had been accomplished, nothing done. Life was one grand bliss of effortless satisfaction. The pioneers were lost in the mists of memory. Science, as an art, had ceased to be.

2030—2050—2070—and the Arbiter was still in faultless condition. Indeed it had been made indestructible.

Men and women died, children were born in limited numbers, grew up, each one knowing less of science than those before them. Astronomy, physics, mathematics? They were things the ancients had studied, said the history records. Somewhere in the smeared archives was the name of Selby Doyle.

Then in 2070 came the first warnings of the trouble Carfax had foreseen. The weather controlling machinery broke down, its central bearings worn out from continued inattention. In consequence the weather suddenly reverted to its former unreliable state and deluged whole continents of synthetic crops, destroyed a world's food supply for a year.

Hurricanes tore across the world. Cities which were slowly eroding through continued lack of repair eroded still more. That gray metal, so shiny at first, was cracking now, flaking under the continued onslaught of the elements.

A nervous flurry passed through the people. For the first time they were really alarmed. They rushed to the weather controlling station but could only stare helplessly at silent, useless machinery. Knowledge was dead.

This was not all. Trouble came thick and fast. With the failure of the crops, animals began to die off. The machines that tended them only functioned so long as they received—from still other machines—steady supplies of crops, specially developed for cattle consumption. When the supply stopped the machines stopped too, and nobody knew what to do about it.

The seed of disaster flourished with terrific speed, burst the foundations of

the formerly calm cities and upset the tranquillity of the pleasure-softened people. The collapse of the weather machinery presaged the overture to the end. Blinding cataracts of rain seeped through corroded roofs, the water short-circuiting the vital power and light machinery, already at breaking point through wear and tear.

Light and power failed in each city simultaneously. Famine reared over a disturbed, turmoiled world girt about with scurrying clouds. In desperation the people turned to the Arbiter, their leader.

But the Arbiter did nothing! It ignored the wild pleas hurled at it, marched out of the insecure laboratory that was its home and departed into the storm-lashed country. In the hour of need it had deserted them.

Panic seized the people at the realization. They fled from cities, whether they knew not, floundered in a mad exodus seeking food that was not there, cursing aloud to the heavens because synthesis had destroyed all natural growth and cultivation. Specialization had been proved a tragedy. Escape from a world which was too perfect became an obsession.

Gradually, inevitably, it was forced upon the people in those hours of mad struggle and desperation that they were face to face with certain extinction.

2080. Panic and struggle had gone. A strange calm was on the world. Cities, crumbled through disuse, ravaged by tempest and flood, poked blind, inquisitive spires to cleared skies. The sun crossed a sky which was, in the main, peaceful again. Climate had adjusted back to its normal vagaries.

But the soft winds of spring, the hot sun of summer, the cool chill of the fall, and the heavy snows of winter fell on bones that were scattered, white and forgotten, across Earth's face. Alone in this world of emptiness, where natural grass and trees were trying once more to struggle through, there moved a cumbersome affair of metal, still cold and impartial, inhuman and relentless. It climbed mountains, it prowled plains, it searched the ruins of cities, it brooded alone. The Arbiter.

3000 A.D. 3020 A.D. Then the Venusians came.

They were strange, birdlike creatures, masters of space travel, lords of their own peculiar science. They came not as conquerors but with the intention of making friends with the third-world people. Their amazement was complete when they could not find a soul alive.

Then eventually they found the Arbiter. With their superior science they analyzed it, probed its deepest secrets, broke open the supposedly impregnable sheathing by four-dimensional tools.

THE Venusians remained on Earth for several days while the leading scientist, Cor Santu, pondered over the curious mystery of a lost race. From studying the dissembled Arbiter and the still remaining records of human events, transcribed by the Leader of Languages, he built up an explanation of the problem.

"Poor earthly scientists!" was his final comment. "Brilliant men indeed—but they forgot one thing. If a world or people is to survive it must have progress, even as we have found in our own experience. Wars are indeed evil and should be prevented. But dictators are worse. Right alone can prevail in the end.

"Selby Doyle and Vincent Carfax did not trust to Right, to a Universal mind control for guidance. No, they invented a machine of twelve mechanical brains to bring them peace. Such a device could not solve the problem. They forgot that a brain, in progres-

sing, must expand. We have seen that, in any case, these Earth beings only used a fifth of their full brain capacity. That, later, would have developed. But in the machine they strangled it. Carfax and the surgeon Gascoyne made these mechanical brains fixed to what was, at that time, the present! To the Arbiter it was always the present! Being rigid metal the imprisoned brains could not expand, could not go a step beyond the day of their creation. That is why the Arbiter destroyed all things that suggested progress, and also because it feared any sign of progress would bring its power to an end. It was just another dictator.

"Such metal bound brains, living in a past world, could not visualize anything progressive. Conservationism gone mad! From the instant the brains were moulded of metal they deteriorated. And having no human sentiment they destroyed without question. So when the great catastrophe came the Arbiter was powerless—as powerless as all the others who had not kept pace with progress. Nature must progress, or perish. That is evolution."

Thereon Cor Santu ended his observations. But when his fleet of spaceships soared through the sunny sky towards fresh worlds of exploration, there was left behind a smashed, irreparable mass of melted cogs, wires, and wheels. It was a rusting monument to a race that had died—a race that had fallen prey to laziness and surrendered its freedom to the ruthless whims of a machine.

THE DARK ANGEL

(Continued from page 41)

on the table. His bleared eyes stared into mine. He was less drunk than he had been when he began his story.

"She did that?" he whispered. "After I—"

"Yes," I said.

"You were there?"

"I was there."

Hathaway stood up.

"Thanks," he said, moistening his lips. "Thanks for coming after me... telling me..."

"I had a reason," I said. "Where are you going?"

"Back to my wife,"

The booth was secluded. No one could see us. I stood up too—and looked at Hathaway. I used the Power.

He died instantly, without pain.

I waited till his body had slumped down out of sight. I was grateful to him. Therefore—I killed him.

But he had given me the answer for which I had been searching for many years. Even an inferior race can be useful. I put Hathaway out of my mind and went toward the door. I was going to Joanna, the future mother of my children, of the new race that would rule the earth.

THE MAD DOMNEYS

(Continued from page 80)

eyes, he steeled himself. "That property is not for sale," he said faintly.

The men stared, apparently not believing their ears. Domney stared, too, seemingly equally shocked by his own words. Yet he held on. In twenty minutes the men had offered him ten thousand dollars; a half-hour later, with Domney dizzily holding out, the price was settled at thirty thousand dollars! And Mr. Curtis was counting out the five thousand cash to Domney.

What happened in the interval between the men's going and his own near collapse on the couch, Domney was never quite able to tell. It was enough that when his family joined him he had the deposit of five one-thousand-dollar bills in his hands.

He grinned into the faces around him. No council of war, this. A family conference, with Oliver C. Domney thrilling to the proud looks of his family.

"Now the Mad Domneys can have everything they want," he cried. "First we'll move to the right side of Lakeland; a fur coat for you, Ann; a new suit for Shaggs; a prep school for Quincy and Sally. And a whole truckload of red salmon for Cecil!" He looked around the room, startled. "Why, where is Cecil?"

"Cecil?" they queried.

THIRD ALTERNATIVE

(Continued from page 17)

police get through questioning you you'll be meat for the nut-hatch."

He paused, added, "You know nothing about this world, and your answers to some of their questions will put you in a padded cell. I'm afraid—especially when I tell them you crashed in here with a story of being an old friend of a former business-associate and then tried to shoot me with my own shotgun. Naturally, knowing you as I do, I doctored the charges in those shells."

"Tell me one thing," pleaded Wister as heavy footsteps sounded in the hall behind the closed door. "How did you know so much about me? How did

"You bet, Cecil!" cried Domney. "He's the big boy around here from now on! It was Cecil who put this deal over. I would have taken Curtis' offer of seventy-five hundred, but Cecil told me to hold out. He heard the men say they'd pay thirty thousand dollars. I held out!"

There was a mad scramble to find Cecil. But Cecil seemed to have vanished into thin air. He was nowhere to be found.

FAR down the street, Cecil stopped for a last look at the Domney residence. His tail was floating above his head, and there was a satisfied, pleased look on his face. He mumbled something under his breath that sounded suspiciously like a quotation. Then, as if impelled by some supernatural force, he set out to overtake Mr. Hale.

Mr. Anthony Hale, hurrying along the sidewalk with the equally silent Mr. Curtis, stole a look at the vellum-bound book Domney had given him. Cecil was following close enough now to see the gilt title letters glittering in the light of the fading day. He couldn't make out the letters, but he didn't have to; he knew that title by heart.

It read: "*Felis Domestica Vagari*, The Wandering Cat, by Phineas de Piedra, the Mystic." And it was taking him off voice now. "Where are you?"

you learn about my deal?"

"Brace yourself," replied Lanning. "It may be a bit of a shock." He moved toward the door as a hard knock sounded, adding, "I knew you well enough to see that you felt especially good this evening."

"But how did you know?"

"There are differences, friend, even in parallel worlds," his host told him. "In yours Lanning was your partner, you had him killed. In mine things worked out differently—and a whole lot better. The partnership isn't the same here. I married you. For in this world you were born a girl."

He opened the door, admitted the police. "Do what you can for this poor crazy devil," he told them. "He seems to have fainted."

THE INVADERS

(Continued from page 70)

what to do. I got to talk. And I'm short of time. I listened, and I heard about you from what the Commander and J.J. said. So I know. And I got something to pass on to you my grandpa said once. When a woman starts going by how she thinks instead of how she feels, she goes all wrong. That's how-come you've been so mixed up. From now on you let the Commander do the thinking and you do the feeling."

He stopped. His words echoed bleakly in her mind. Feel? How could she feel? The feeling part of her had died with the dead around her. She was cold and empty inside. She could not even feel glad that Hector was alive.

"Miss?" the husky whisper brought her back to the boy in front of her.

"Yes?" she said.

"There was something else—"

"Go on," she said, dully. He hesitated, avoiding her eye.

"I—" his whisper was desperate, urgent, weakening.

FOR a second the cold emptiness inside her was touched. "I love you," he whispered.

Like the sweet warmth of the spring rain on the frozen ground, the words beat down on the icy cold within her, the dam crumbled and the floodtide of her emotions swept forth to bring her back once more to the world of the living. Her heart broke in a sudden wash of tears and she kissed him.

"Oh Bonny, Bonny baby," she choked, "I love you too."

Beneath her, the boy choked suddenly and stiffened. A final rush of blood rushed from his mouth—to stain her tunie, but she paid it no attention. For, when she looked down at his face, she saw that he had heard her at the last, for he was smiling.

In anguish, but without restraint, like someone who has bought back life at a great price, but counts the cost worth while, Tica wept.

CLOCKWORK

(Continued from page 86)

Just what emotions boiled in Griffenhoek, do you suppose, as he stealthily inserted his hieroglyphs and his timers? To tamper with nature is a troubling thing: to gouge the earth, to fell a redwood, to dam a river—these are in a way all acts of impudence. But to blur the very lantern of our sky itself!

And what emotions, do you suppose, boil in Griffenhoek now? Returned to the university, he is my good friend still. But he has sequestered a corner of his mind. I nag him, beg him, scold him. But he only answers, "Me, Lanson? Me? What are you talking about."

Yet for all his bravado I think I sense in him a preying guilt, as though over some dreadful impiety.

And I? Well, few elementary textbooks provide the delicious shivers of a Machen or a James. Yet over and over, with profound unease, I read a simple passage in a high school *Elements of Geology*:

When the Earth was torn out of the gassy fabric of the sun by some errant star, its surface solidified quickly. Within fifteen thousand years, Earth was solidly encrusted, although this crust from time to time collapsed inward upon a core which contracted a little as it cooled. Such collapses, perhaps six or seven of them, formed Earth's mountains. . . .

But the core is liquid still, molten at prodigious temperatures. If volcanos have not already been convincing, to descend deep into any mine is to learn that the core of the earth is a furnace. . . .
GANYMEDE PLEASURE CLUB

A pretty thought!

In fact, it might be as well to heed my friend Griffenhoek. It would be improper of him, it would be maniacal, to act against us. Still, perhaps we should try a little harder to make sense.

Otherwise, someday. . . .
Tick-tick-tick-tick.



Virgil
Finlay



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